The Early Works of Ben Lerner

by

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For Sidney and Simon
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…the true poem remains beyond you, inscribed on the far side of the mirror.

Ben Lerner, *Leaving The Atocha Station*
Midway through Ben Lerner’s novel *Leaving The Atocha Station* (2011), Adam, the disillusioned narrator, remarks that a poet’s undisguised archaism is precisely what privileges his or her position in a society full of frauds:

> Who wasn’t squatting in one of the handful of prefabricated subject positions proffered by capital or whatever you wanted to call it.... If I was a poet, I had become one because poetry, more intensely than any other practice, could not evade its anachronism and marginality and so constituted a kind of acknowledgement of my own preposterousness, admitting my bad faith in good faith, so to speak. (Lerner *Leaving the Atocha Station* 101)

The paradox of the poet who admits the failures of the society that produced him is precisely that he inevitably finds those same faults in his own poetic representations. Yet from this self-critical irony, Adam realizes that despite his preposterousness, being in “good faith” is freeing, as it allows him to see his words and his society for what they are, and then, in a moment of renewed inspiration, to reimagine the bond between his poetry and his community.

Born in 1979 in Topeka, Kansas, Ben Lerner attended Brown University, where he received his undergraduate degree in political theory and his MFA in

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1 After the first citation of each of Lerner’s books, the following abbreviations will be used: *The Lichtenberg Figures* will be TLF; *Angle Of Yaw* will be AY; *Topekan Ethos* will be TE; *Mean Free Path* will be MFP; and *Leaving The Atocha Station* will be LAS.
poetry. During his graduate studies, he co-founded, with Deb Klowden, *No: A Journal Of The Arts*, which, over the course of seven issues between 2003 and 2008, published an extraordinary collection of poets, young and old.\(^2\)

In 2004, Copper Canyon Press published Lerner’s debut collection, the sonnet sequence *The Lichtenberg Figures*—a book that, according to its back cover, “interrogates the relationships between language and memory, violence and form,” and whose idiom ranges from bragging to biography, from slang to song, from theory to pseudointellectual irony (*The Lichtenberg Figures BC*). The disjunctive style of Lerner’s first collection, which he once described as “voltas without insulation,” is him at his most oblique (Lerner "Ben Lerner in Conversation with Kent Johnson"). Rather than name his central point of inquiry, he circles around it, pulling from many spheres of contemporary American life to articulate what is less an ideological claim of his wants for his society than it is a stance towards the degenerate one that exists. In many ways, *The Lichtenberg Figures* as a whole is an inquiry into the status of subjectivity—and especially poetic subjectivity—in a culture overrun by images, aggression, and its own past.

Following a yearlong Fulbright in Madrid, Lerner published his second collection, *Angle Of Yaw* (2006), which stood as a finalist for that year’s National Book Award. A collection of short prose poems bookended, and also divided, by three brief lineated sections, *Angle Of Yaw* is Lerner’s attempt to describe the afflictions that limit the interpersonal, communicative potential of public space—

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whether that comprises looking at a painting in a museum, writing a letter to a friend, reading a poem in a book, watching a war on television, looking down from an airplane, or seeing your own reflection in a store window. Of particular importance is “Didactic Elegy,” a long, highly theoretical, lineated poem at the center of the collection. Combining two distinct types of poetry—didactic poetry and elegy—“Didactic Elegy” takes the instructive tonalities of theory and scholarship and combines them with a mournful representation of September 11th. In doing so, Lerner engages in a complex examination of the role of representation in meaning making in post-September 11th American life, and in particular, of how a poetic representation of the event can effectively situate itself in relation to a culture it derides.

After issuing a chapbook, Topekan Ethos (2010), Lerner published his third collection, Mean Free Path (2010), and the following year, his first novel, Leaving The Atocha Station (2011). Both works of poetry employ a more emotive, generative vocabulary than Lerner’s previous collections in order to reimagine the relationship between poetry and its readers in a manner that may, with luck, engender change in other spheres of private and public life. More explicitly, Mean Free Path takes up the question of how to write love poetry in a reality incompatible with genuine emotional expression. Leaving The Atocha Station, on the other hand, is a meditation on the evolution of his theoretical concerns from the start of his career up to its publication.³

Beyond the usual spectrum of reviews—good and bad, well argued and poorly argued—there is presently a dearth of criticism that focuses exclusively on Lerner’s

³ Lerner is also the poetry editor of Critical Quarterly and the American Reader. His art criticism has been published Art In America, Frieze, The Los Angeles Review Of Books, Harper’s, and numerous other places. He is currently on the faculty of Brooklyn College’s MFA program, and in 2013 he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. His second novel, 10:04, will be published this fall.
work, obviously owing to the fact that the work is very new. He has been mentioned in a few academic articles, most notably in one article each by Ann Kenniston and Brian Reed, both published in *Contemporary Literature*, but always in the context of a broader poetic scene to which he is an addendum (Keniston; Reed). Without a predetermined critical starting point, I have spent much of the past year reading poetry by, and criticism on, other authors who I believe for a variety of different reasons bear some relation to Lerner. Among an older cohort, this includes work by and on John Ashbery, Robert Creeley, César Vallejo, Rosemarie Waldrop, Keith Waldrop, Lyn Hejinian, Rae Armantrout, C. D. Wright, Ron Silliman, Charles Bernstein, and Allen Grossman. Of Lerner’s peers, this includes Peter Cole, Geoffrey G. O’Brien, Aaron Kunin, Juliana Spahr, and Claudia Rankine. Criticism and theory on and by these poets served as my starting points in my attempts to find a vocabulary in which to situate Lerner. What I have discovered is that Lerner is not an iconoclast, though he is exceptional; there is an as-yet-unnamed cultural matrix within which his work is profoundly important, and to which he distinctly belongs. Less a defined school than a pervasive response to a cultural moment, the work of Lerner and his contemporaries resists the impulse of isolation arising from an American society they view as fundamentally ineffectual—culturally, economically, politically, and humanistically.

Although there is much that could be said about the particular literary features of Lerner’s writing—his habits of syntax, his line breaks, his use of form, etc.—all of which deserve attention, I focus primarily on how Lerner’s writing represents and engages with a broader society and its public sphere. When I read his books together,
what tugs at me most acutely is not his use of any particular device, but his temper. Lerner is adept at veiling complex theories and ideas behind whacky, modern exteriors. But distrustful of his own irony, Lerner almost always turns his writing on itself, examining the capacity of his own language to represent, and questioning the place of that representation within a broader, dehumanized American culture. When asked, in a 2005 interview, about the role of the poet in modern life, Lerner responded, “I think that the poet, whether she likes it or not, always has to struggle against what Chuck D [the rapper] has called the ‘dumbassification’ of American culture, against the deadening of intellect upon which our empire depends” ("Tuesday, March 08, 2005"). In this way, the grammatical “I” is, for Lerner, inherently tied to its function as a meditating tool in the greater project of locating “us.” My aim was to take three different approaches to illuminating how Lerner has uses the remnants of this utterly debased culture to articulate a new potentiality for poetry.

Relating three depictions of terrorism in Lerner’s writing—of September 11, 2001 in the United States in *The Lichtenberg Figures* and *Angle Of Yaw*, and of March 11, 2004 in Spain in *Leaving The Atocha Station*—my first chapter will illuminate how Lerner thinks meaning making in mass culture has enclosed the individuals constituting the American public in an unending and deceptive cycle of representation and reinterpretation, closing off their access to the real. In a typically Lernerian fashion, this static time of endlessly trying to find value in violence, what he terms “periodization,” circles back into a meta-poetic inquiry into the potential for
poetry to aesthetically represent a violent event such as September 11th without enacting an illusory assignation of value (TLF 140).

In my second chapter, I use The Lichtenberg Figures and Angle Of Yaw to situate Lerner’s varied uses and imaginings of the lyric voice in the context of its slow dissolution and eventual re-solidification over the course of late-twentieth century and early twenty-first century American poetry. I conceive of Lerner’s poetry within a particular narrative of what is often called an avant-garde tradition—from John Ashbery, to the Language poets, to who Christopher Nealon calls, for lack of a better name, the “post-Language poets” (Nealon, “Camp Messianism” 588). In particular, I am interested in lyric voices within the history of the medium as they relate to the means of conceptualizing broader cultural and political moments. In my final turn, I open up the practical issues of lyric subjectivity to Lerner’s theorization of an ideal mode of lyric poetry, whose voice, while necessarily mediated by language, would communicate immediately to its reader, re-actualizing the possibility of depth in public life.

With my third and final chapter, I shift my attention to Topekan Ethos and Mean Free Path, in which Lerner offers two tonally distinct sets of poems that reimagine their present using major, rather than minor, emotions. Comparing the minor, non-cathartic affective categories theorized by Fredric Jameson and Sianne Ngai, I propose that Lerner uses fragmentation to push his poems towards what Allen Grossman terms a “virtual” poetics—i.e. one that retools language in order to gesture towards the abstract potential of the medium (Grossman 89). For Lerner, this simply
means a culture open to a genuine expression of love: a modest personal achievement that implies the possibility of communicating a different kind of public affect.

Because Lerner remains a young writer, this project remains incomplete. Thus, I have chosen not to include a formal conclusion. Instead, I simply wish to note that Lerner’s most recently published poetry explores the idea of “corporate personhood,” both in its present political definition and in terms of a contemporary take on an imagined Whitmanian “transpersonal subject” (Lerner "Bookform Talks with Ben Lerner"). This move, from a deeply personal desire for a generative poetry in *Mean Free Path*, to a communal interpretation of a similar wish, reveals that Lerner’s project remains wide open. So does my own.
In historical categorization, when does one period end and another begin?

Looking back on the first decade of the new century, it is easy for us to point to unexpected moments of extreme violence and collective grieving as points of rupture—September 11, 2001 in the United States, for example, or March 11, 2004 in Spain. In an era dominated by mass culture, large-scale terrorist attacks have the rare power to effect mass redefinition of individuals’ understandings of their own identity within the public sphere, as well as the construction of shared time. Through each of his works, Ben Lerner has, in some capacity, grappled with the problems that condition the relationship between individual people and their communities in post-attack life. Using the American community’s response to September 11th, in particular, Lerner repeatedly demonstrates how the media’s repeated representation of moments of distress in mass culture allows authorities of public meaning and value, and especially political authorities, to impose their own calculated, disjunctive interpretations of those events on their constituents—often with the aim of justifying what are equally violent, wanting responses. By repeatedly assigning values to violent moments that have no adequate measure, this process has the auxiliary effect of blocking personal formulations of one’s own real experiences. As this sort of communal preoccupation revisits itself over time, exacerbating a sense of disjunction by generating a culture that appears to constantly reiterate itself—a static temporality,
or what Lerner refers to as “periodization”—a cycle is formed by which the attacks are repeatedly represented in the media in a manner that bears little resemblance to, but is often equated with, the initial events. The unintended consequence of this repetition is that by conflating representations of the attack with the attack itself, people’s memories of the attack are distanced from their memories of violence. In other words, as people lose control over their own interpretations, they lose awareness of their experiential subjectivity, so that instead of making contact with the real in a communal presence, they simulate that contact as part of a constructed audience.

Grappling with the problem of how to represent mourning in poetry in post-September 11th American society without enacting the failures of mass culture, Lerner invokes a long overdue need for difference, for an alternate response. In three related works—a sonnet from The Lichtenberg Figures (2004), the long poem “Didactic Elegy” from Angle Of Yaw (2006), and his novel Leaving The Atocha Station (2011)—Lerner establishes a progression of thought on the problem, moving from a diagnostic perspective towards an articulation of one possible poetic solution. Despite illuminating the aforementioned static temporality in Lerner’s writing, and especially in “Didactic Elegy,” this chapter will not provide complete readings of Lerner’s works, nor will it fully articulate Lerner’s prescriptions for social and poetic recourse; rather, by moving between and across poems, it aims to use Lerner’s depictions of terrorism to uncover his diagnoses of the ills that trouble his American community, or better yet, his sense of an American community.

Essential to Lerner in this task are twin worries that touch on his interpretation of the way mass media conflates representations of September 11th with the real
events: first, that critical evaluators will read his poems against, and in place of, the
violence of September 11th, denying their merit as aesthetic and philosophical
meditations; and second, that critical assignations of value generally execute their
own logic regardless of the content of their subject.

Thus, by providing three distinct but related readings, this chapter will, with
intentional exceptions, abandon outside texts and reference points, and instead will
read Lerner’s works formally on their own terms. I make this point to contrast my
project with two growing bodies of criticism regarding post-September 11th and post-
millennial poetry. The first, which makes what I call the “culturally relevant”
argument, tends to assert that poetry regained a lost social value in the aftermath of
September 11th. These critical works use poems popular in the aftermath of the
attacks to make a claim about society in a manner that devalues both, providing
incomplete analyses of “community” in post-9/11 life and shortchanging relevant
poems in their readings. Karen Alkalay-Gut’s “The Poetry of September 11: The
Testimonial Imperative,” for example, argues that after September 11th, poetry
“acquired a long lost social purpose—to order, inform, unite, and console a confused
and grieving public” (Alkalay-Gut 257).4 It was a unique moment that allowed
“poems…depicting the actual experience of escaping or witnessing the burning
towers firsthand [to] appear side by side with poems about the tragedy invading the
living room” (265-66). Although Alkalay-Gut states that this parity of perspective is
the relevant point, Lerner wishes to more explicitly distinguish between the attack
and its representations—between a public produced by violence and a public

4 For other examples of the “culturally relevant” argument, see Philip Metres’s essay “Beyond Grief
and Grievance,” and Moberley Luger’s doctoral dissertation, Poetry After 9/11: Constructing The
Memory Of Crisis (Metres; Luger).
produced by a poem. The second critical trend, the “trauma” reading, situates post-
September 11th poetry within the narrow scope of contemporary trauma theory,
undertaking precisely the sort of directed project of which Lerner is weary. Although
Ann Keniston’s article “‘Not Needed, Except as Meaning’: Belatedness in Post-9/11
American Poetry,” provides a convincing analysis of “belatedness” as represented in
contemporary poetry, “manifested for trauma victims in repetition, flashbacks,
prolepsis, and other forms of temporal instability,” she does so in the context of a
specific theoretical framework and set of evaluative measures developed over the past
quarter century “from the confluence of Freudian thought, Lacanian rereadings of
Freud, and scholarly study of the Holocaust” (Keniston 663).5 While her readings are
relevant to this chapter’s analysis of Lerner’s diagnosis, I wish to heed Lerner’s
apprehension of critics who might pursue their own predetermined logic in lieu of
engaging with their primary texts.

After considering a later sonnet from The Lichtenberg Figures, in which
Lerner portrays the attack as a historical rupture that catalyzes a desire for change that
ultimately proves to be grounded in deceptive interpretations, this chapter will turn to
Leaving The Atocha Station and eventually to “Didactic Elegy.” The former,
grounded in the context of the 2004 bombings in Madrid, offers a self-contained
account of a young American’s progression from disillusionment to a possible
reengagement, in part by using the post-attack response of young Madrileños as
counterpoints to the narrator, Adam, a young, disenchanted, disengaged American
poet on a prestigious fellowship abroad. The latter implicates the medium of

5 For other examples of the “trauma” reading, Judith Greenberg’s edited volume Trauma At Home:
After 9/11 (Greenberg).
representation—in this case, poetry—in its deduction of the static temporal logic of post-September 11th reality: the problem of how reiteration and reinterpretation creates the illusion of disjunction in a culture repeatedly enacting its own failures. This chapter will explore Lerner’s belief that the American mass media’s reiterative response to September 11th has prevented individuals from accessing their own sense of present self, the real of their own subjective experiences, and how that produces, over time, an oddly disengaged posture towards public life. Lerner thinks that an alternate means of representation, especially poetic, is needed that can move past deceptive interpretations of collective events. He wishes to articulate the possibility of poetry responding to the tragedy of September 11th without enacting American delusions, to fundamentally reimagine the presently problematic relationship between artistic representation, meaning making, and public life.

Lerner first mentions his preoccupation regarding how artistic representations depict the attack on the Twin Towers in a later sonnet in The Lichtenberg Figures. Anticipating many of the questions that permeate his subsequent writings on terrorism, Lerner portrays the attack as a historical rupture that catalyzes a desire for cultural change, signaling a turn towards a fundamentally different period, one still unknown or unavailable. Yet in doing so, he undermines his own basic assumption that a shift has occurred, revealing a culture prone to repetitive reenactment, unable to escape the bonds of its own obsessive, degenerative, aesthetic values. The implication here is that a poet or artist who exists within a society configured around certain modes of cultural value and meaning making—even if they outwardly oppose such a
culture—will inevitably run up against the fact that the assignation of cultural value is not simply a matter of creative projects, but also a frame of mind. It is futile, whether through art or even one’s own thinking, to try to maneuver one’s way out of a time of mass culture, in which the values of the media and state have no ascertainable limits. Thus, an event that causes an experience of disjunction is, despite your perception of it, made of the same substance of what existed prior. The creation of what appear to be disjunctive moments that make the real inaccessible may in fact be imagined shifts in a larger, communally effacing assignation of value:

In the early ‘00s, my concern with abstraction culminated in a series of public exhalations. I was praised for my use of repetition. But, alas, my work was understood.

Then the towers collapsed and antimissile missiles tracked the night sky with ellipses.

I decided that what we needed was a plain style, not more condoms stuffed with chocolate frosting. After six months in my studio, I emerged and performed a series of public exhalations.

Only time will tell if my work is representational. Only time will tell if time will tell.  

( TLF 48 )

The movement of this poem emphasizes the hinge of the conjunction “then” in the fifth line, recording the gap or disjunction the speaker perceives between pre- and post-September 11th artistic life, and signifying an immanent change to the relationship between aesthetic pursuits and public culture. That the pre-September 11th “series of public exhalations” garners accolades suggests that, despite their inattention to literalism, these artistic products capture a representative element of the
broader “public.” After alluding to the attack on the Twin Towers, the second stanza refers vaguely to the American military’s invasion of Afghanistan (the response of a politically defined “public”) in the “antimissile missiles.” The ellipses in the sky are a haunting, physical remnant of the American response. However, by implying what is unspoken, they are also a communal moment of silence aesthetically rendered—both an elegant visual elegy for the violence and destruction of the period and, in the failure to articulate, an acknowledgement of a lacking or wanting quality in the American response. Yet considered in relation to the more radical propositions of the third stanza, and to the casual violence of Lerner’s first collection more generally, even the lacking quality represented by the ellipses feels bored and overused, as if the cultural turn towards violence—both in the attack, and in the American response—were so commonplace that its being depicted or elegized were a rote mechanism not worth illustrating or voicing. The possibility is thus raised that any response to violence would be inadequate, as it would arise from a culture that has already degraded human experience to a narrow set of prefabricated experiences.

Bolstering the assertion that the ellipses in the sky can, and should, be read only as a half-genuine acknowledgment of what has become a conditioned procedure of violence and mourning, Lerner writes in an earlier sonnet in the same collection:

When a dream of convenience begins to dream itself, 
the neighborhood’s last bamboos reel in their shoots.
The children make love “execution style,”
Then hold each other like moments of silence.
(18)

While word the “reel” implies a desperate, violent lurch against an unknown obstinate force, it also evokes the idea that these bamboos are the “last” components of “the
real” in “the neighborhood,” the lyric voice’s community (18). Or more acutely, that there is a last remaining element of the real within the “dream of convenience,” Freud’s term for the dream that “has taken the place of action,” and it is reeling hopelessly against the negative force producing the dream (Freud 149). Although the phrase “dream of convenience” is undeniably Freud’s, it also has a distinctly economic tone, recalling the cultural motivations of mass production. In this reading, Lerner’s line suggests that youthfulness has not simply been replaced by a dream of convenience, but a dream of convenience that, by its degenerative psychology of mass culture, is unknowingly self-replicating its own self-destruction. Children of this reality do not make contact with the real through sex, but instead arbitrate, and then—quite ironically—mourn, their own negation. That is, the experience of sex, in both its progenerative and pleasurable associations, is reduced to yet another enactment of cultural value in “a dream of convenience” that lacks a substantive quality (TLF 18).

In a moment in which the real is inaccessible, what claims to be an honest attempt to gain access to it is precisely its opposite: it is a performed act, claiming to be the real thing, but actually only a framed or staged counterpart.

In applying this logic of mourning to the original sonnet, it becomes clear that the ellipses in the sky after September 11th are not a real act of mourning, but a performed mourning made of the same substance as the violence it supposedly mourns. Represented unknowingly by members of society who cannot see—and even if they could see, cannot act—outside of their produced frame of reference, the ellipses are society’s theatrical display of itself, through which the modes of mass culture restructure and harden their control. A type of disengagement disguised as
engagement, and an anesthetized perspective on politics and communal life, the ellipses do not elegize their culture, but enact it.

In the third stanza, the lyric voice demands something other than a return to normalcy—a shift that occurs through another “series of public exhalations” that retreat from the abstraction of the dominant mode; its hope is that the aesthetic terms of the newly completed exhalation will likewise capture a representative element of the altered public culture. Though not abstract, the sonnet’s description of the aesthetics of the status quo as “condoms stuffed with chocolate frosting” invokes theatricality, a public prone to dramatic, inexplicable indulgences (which is, in fact, abstract in the sense that it avoids representing the real). The final stanza holds out hope for the public mode to change, to come into agreement with a still-unconstructed aesthetics described as a “plain style,” somehow distinct from the depersonalized mass values of life’s abstraction. “Only time will tell” if the process of dislocation and disjunction will pivot into a new time of the real—quite literally, if the passage of time will bring about the sort of change usually associated with the passage of time. For now the speaker’s life must go on within a stagnated cultural moment, its attention focused on adequately representing the experience of an event that is fading into memory. But unknowingly, like a dream that dreams itself, Lerner’s voice exhibits the same “public exhalations” as if they were not mere repetition, as if, impossibly, they defined something new.

But what exactly occurs in the moment of temporal rupture that forces meaning to be unfixed, time to falsely appear unhinged? Adam Gordon, the narrator
of Lerner’s *Leaving The Atocha Station*, is a young American poet on a fellowship in Madrid. Supposedly researching and writing a long poem on the literary heritage of the Spanish Civil War—of which, admittedly, he has neither the knowledge nor the intention to complete—Adam divides his year, which he ironically refers to as his “project,” into a series of “phases,” distinct in their pacing (and in the particular combination of hash and prescription medicine in which he chooses to indulge).

Incredulous of the world in which he lives, Adam deconstructs the experiences that fill his year abroad by means of an uneasy investment in a peculiar, self-obsessive disengagement. Though he wishes to participate in genuine, meaningful human interaction, Adam is skeptical of the authenticity of his experiences—of whether the real can translate across the barriers of language, time, capital, etc. Manifested in the contemporary world both he and Lerner belong to, Adam’s position resonates (albeit with more philosophical grounding) with a particular sort of American privilege that disengages from all components of collective life, especially politics. He experiences the events of his year abroad, including the March 11, 2004 terrorist attack on Atocha Station, not through the mediators of language, film, touch, etc., but as metacommentaries on the mediation of experience itself. Exemplifying the post-September 11th turn of the sonnet from *The Lichtenberg Figures*, Adam’s experience of the post-March 11th environment highlights how critical approaches to moments of unconscionable violence provoke a need, however deceptive, to differentiate cultural products in the aftermath of an attack from that of the pre-attack community.

Attending an event at a gallery run by some of his Spanish friends the night of March 11, Adam reflects on the dominant mood among his fellow attendees:
I overheard conversation about the role of photography now, where ‘now’ meant post-March 11. A ‘post’ was being formed, and the air was alive less with excitement of a period than with the excitement of periodization. I heard something about how the cell phone, instrumental to organizing the marches, was the dominant political technology of the age. What about Titadine, the form of compressed dynamite used in the attacks, I wanted to say; wasn’t that the dominant technology? I said this to Teresa, who corrected me gently as we poured ourselves drinks: these attacks were ‘made for TV.’ (LAS 140)

The violent, dislocating shift caused by the mass killing of almost 200 individuals, and the injuring of almost 2000, quickly—but perhaps also artificially—destabilizes a culture and a politics. “Periodization” is a process of temporal hedging, clearly delineating between a “before,” a causal event, and a possible resulting “now.” But that “these attacks were ‘made for TV’” means that they are made not for viewing and experiencing, but for reviewing and re-experiencing, seemingly without end or purpose—halting the present within a moment that is less a “period” than a spectacle induced hinge between two periods, a static moment—a new, belated present still waiting to begin.

This distinction, that “periodization” is not a new time but the experience of a desire for a new time, reprises the earlier sonnet’s insinuation that feeling that the present necessitates a different aesthetics may be a collective self-deception. On a panel on the subject of “literature now,” meaning post-March 11th, Adam introduces his opinion on the subject of temporal disjunction by describing how its creation by a
collective fixation on the attack is not the effect of a new aesthetic logic, but rather of an intensification of one already available in force (161).

I heard myself say, my voice sounding to me as though it issued from the back of the auditorium, from deep within the audience itself, “Ortega y Gasset wrote ‘By speaking, by thinking, we undertake to clarify things, and that forces us to exacerbate them, dislocate them, schematize them. Every concept is in itself an exaggeration…. [M]y fear about this panel is that we are in a hurry to define a period, to speak of literature now; every period, like every concept, is in itself an exaggeration….’” (174)

The experience of existing in a new period rooted in the attacks, and in the meaning or value gained from them, is thus differentiated from the more persuasive notion that an outside force, what Adam refers to as “our economic mode” and our “mode of production,” is bolstering an evaluative critical project in a manner that creates the illusion of a cultural and temporal dislocation (50).

Parsing the critical project that depersonalizes the public sphere into a “we” that experiences mass disjunction, Adam describes the process by which the media’s repeated portrayal of a recorded image of the attack on Atocha is made to supplant individuals’ own experiences of the real at the moment of the event. Recalling the experience of trying to gather information just hours after the attack, during which he wandered the hazy, murderous streets of Madrid towards the Atocha Station, Adam writes,

I went back up to my apartment and refreshed the Times; the number of estimated dead was now about two hundred, at least a thousand injured. I
considered walking back to Atocha, but instead I opened *El País* in another window and the *Guardian* in a third. I sat smoking and refreshing the home pages and watching the numbers change. I could feel the newspaper accounts modifying or replacing my memory of what I’d seen; was there a word for that feeling? (119)

Adam’s sense that his memory is shifting according to his attention to news media is precisely how reinterpretation draws people from a progressive experience of time into a time that is pending, constantly reliving the climactic event of their past by different accounts. He is drawn into a moment that is not the start of a distinct “period,” but in the midst of “periodization.” Adam is also highlighting the point, important to Lerner in “Didactic Elegy,” that the psychological distance created by repeatedly reevaluating the attacks, through what the back cover of *Angle Of Yaw* refers to as “technologies of viewing,” and especially the internet, tends—at least in American culture—to become a part of individuals’ sense of self, generating disengaged reactions to real violence (*Angle of Yaw BC*).

In Adam’s Spanish friends, however, Lerner provides a counter to the disengaged posture he associates with American public life. In particular, Teresa, Adam’s translator and one of his two romantic interests, is able to move between distinct spheres of her life, private and public, without opening up her own sense of self to the deceptive forces that are causing her community—or more accurately, Adam’s sense of her community—to be dislocated by the process of reinterpretation. At no point after the attack on Atocha Station do Teresa and her friends feel removed from the immediacy of the violence; rather, it empowers them to effect political and
social change in congruence with their previously held beliefs. Not long after the attacks, Adam tells Teresa that he is in awe of her ability to “move without apparent transition from [her] stylish apartment to a protest” (LAS 141). She responds, “All you’re describing…is the personality of a translator. From apartment to protest, from English to Spanish” (LAS 142). The idea of “translation” as the process of shifting from one experience of the real to another without slipping away from the real is in clear contrast to Lerner’s depiction of the American response to violence, in which outside forces deceitfully maneuver their way between one’s interior sense of self and one’s experience of public events. The goal, as Teresa and her Spanish peers experience life regularly, and as Adam discovers in rare moments of poetic flight, is to locate one’s sense of self in the real despite the illusions of experience:

To embrace the tragic interchangeability of nouns and smile inscrutably or to find a way of touching down, albeit momentarily, and be made visible by swirling condensation and debris and to know that one pole of experience is always caught up in the other but to know this finally in your body, cone of heat unfurling. To take everything personally until your personality dissolves and you can move without transition from apartment to protest or distribute yourself among shifting configurations of bodies, saying yes to everything, affirming nothing, your own body “giving up / Its shape in a gesture that expresses that shape” (LAS 146).

To know your body to be a “cone of heat unfurling” is to locate it in the moment of experience, in the real, so that even when entering into the public world, at which point “your personality dissolves,” you remain distinct. It is to say “yes” to the
falseness of representation without “affirming” it. The final line, taken from Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait In A Convex Mirror,” refers, in part, to an unyielding sense of the form of one’s self when facing the uncertain forces of experience, solid, “Like a wave breaking on a rock” (Ashbery Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror: Poems 144). Likewise, Teresa can move between spheres of occurrence while remaining distinct from them, allowing the media’s unreality to pass through her without becoming a part of her, applying pressure on it where necessary, working towards an improved sense of “us.” Though Teresa and her friends understand that politics are a performance, they remain cognizant of its real effects.

Adam, on the other hand, remains a foreigner in Spanish culture, able to access their motivation at times, but never able to feel at home in it. In fact, Adam is more sensitive than any of his friends to a possible dislocation and schematization forming in Spanish public life, in part because what he is experiencing is not Spain, but yet another American delusion. He claims that “you can’t study a mode of production directly,” just pages after noting of the other young, American tourists, “that nothing was more American, whatever that means, than feeling the American, whatever that is, and that their soft version of self-imposed exile was just another of late empire’s packaged tours” (LAS 50, 49). Even when trying to authentically experience a foreign culture, Adam is trapped by the American frame of mind—endlessly reinterpreting, incessantly stuck in a narrative of dislocation.

As an American, Lerner, like Adam and unlike Teresa, is susceptible to interior change according to fluctuations in public value. In “Didactic Elegy,” Lerner
considers the role of poetry in representing September 11\textsuperscript{th} within the American critical project. It is both a work of poetic criticism wrestling with the issue of how representations of September 11\textsuperscript{th} assign value to the attacks, as well as an artistic representation of the same attack. Consequently, Lerner makes the unusual move in “Didactic Elegy” of broaching questions about representation and September 11\textsuperscript{th} in poetic terms, creating a meta-reflexive vocabulary by which to interpret poetry (and thus the poem being read) as an example of a medium of representation. Hence, Lerner opens “Didactic Elegy” by distinguishing between the creative project and the critical project. The creative project, associated with the “I” of the poem’s lyric voice, refers to artistic action separated from its perception, whether that means the attack on the Twin Towers or the making of representations of the attack. The critical project, which the lyric voice assigns to a characterized component of itself it calls “the critic,” involves the apprehension of completed works and ensuing assignations of value. Circling back to his meta-critical project, Lerner then defines “masterpieces” in terms analogous to Adam’s description of exaggeration and schematization on the panel on “literature now,” as works “enduringly susceptible to radical revaluations”—implying that representations of September 11\textsuperscript{th} have done exactly that to the event of the towers collapsing. In particular, he resumes his discussion of a dislocated American community detached from the real by tracking the shifting label of heroism in public opinion through its critical reinterpretations, a force motivated by the ubiquity of mass culture. Defining heroism as the willingness to accept death, Lerner creates a clear linear narrative of interpretation:

After the towers collapsed
many men and women were described as heroes.
The first men and women described as heroes were in the towers.
To call them heroes, however, implies that they were willing to accept their deaths.
But then why did some men and women jump from the towers as the towers collapsed?
One man, captured on tape, flapped his arms as he fell.

Rescue workers who died attempting to save the men and women trapped in the towers are, in fact, heroes, but the meaning of their deaths is susceptible to radical revaluation. The hero makes a masterpiece of dying and even if the hero is a known quantity there is an open struggle over the meaning of her death. According to the president,

any American who continues her life as if the towers had not collapsed is a hero. This is to conflate the negative with the counterfactual.  
(AY 62-63)

Supposedly closest to the actual moment of the attacks, the first part of this passage is also the most intensely mournful. However, in the final line of the first full stanza, the speaker subtly undermines its own connection to the deaths it is describing by reminding the reader that these events are primarily witnessed on television after the fact. That there is a distinct dissimilarity between the conditions of public value before and after the attack reveals an American society that, incessantly reinterpreting a tragedy “captured on tape,” and thus increasingly detached from the real, is not experiencing authentic dislocation, but rather the illusion of dislocation caused by the deluded critic’s repeated re-assignation of value.

Just as the news media’s varied depictions of March 11th replace Adam’s memories of his experience at the scene of the attack only hours before, so Lerner locates the authority of the critical project of the American public sphere—finding value and meaning in September 11th—in the discursive seat of political power, and
the mass media through which it is experienced. The instability of masterpieces, generally speaking, is precisely that reevaluation occurs whenever there is a critic to “[assign] value where there is none” (61). By describing value shifting “according to the president,” and not “according to Bush,” the speaker is implying that it is the office and not the person that is granted authority in the sphere of public discourse. As a political office, the presidency represents all collective interests, including those relevant to meaning making; in the context of Lerner’s poem, the president becomes a sort of highest critic. Although “the president’s statement is meaningless,” his amplified microphone commands unparalleled influence in the “community” to which Lerner belongs (62). Specifically, by offering a “counterfactual” interpretation of the attack, assigning value to what would be true if the attack had not taken place, the president assigns an illusory meaning. If politics, as Lerner phrases it, is “the mere appearance of significance” in a culture in which “significance is real but impermanent,” then, as the communal voice of endless reinterpretation, the president is the epitome of a society structured as a theatrical echo of itself (65). In Lerner’s understanding, the president embodies the collective supposition: through that character, a falsely perceived temporal shift is bound to recurring acts of violence, and the ensuing problem of finding meaning. By locating meaning, however unreal, in the events of September 11th, the president expresses an interpretation then experienced by millions. Lerner describes this docile American collectivity in an earlier prose poem in Angle Of Yaw, the second half of which reads:

We have the sense of being convinced, but of what? And by whom? The public is a hypothetical hole, a realm of pure disappearance, from which
To experience the empty rhetoric of “the public” is, as Lerner describes in this poem, to feel an automatic response to an emotional but unintelligent authorial voice. The speaker’s question regarding the indeterminate “sense of being convinced” is lost in the abyss of meaninglessness governed by power’s hollow, but emotionally appealing words. By the logic of this poem, individuals are drawn without choice into the theater of power motivated by death. But the question of what is causing the president to “say famous last words” raises the possibility that the unknown “sense of being convinced” is the speaker feeling the president’s words replacing their own memory of an event that required a political response. By this reading, the president’s guidance for how Americans should extract value from the attacks of September 11th eventually replaces their memory of the attacks, so that rather than reinterpret the events, Americans reinterpret imagined claims regarding the events; rather than reevaluate a hero’s death, they reevaluate falsely constructed interpretations of that death. Moreover, the president’s use of “famous last words” suggests a recycled response, one both banal and meaningless, which nevertheless holds a contextual power and provides a sense of knowing comfort.

The complication of writing a poem that elegizes the events of September 11th is precisely that Lerner wishes—albeit, at this point, without a way forward—to imagine the possibility of poetry without reenacting the critical interpretive process of investing value or meaning. Over time, repetition and reexamination results in a loss of the real that belongs to a category of temporal moments Adam describes as “ready-
made literature,” because “the ease with which they could be represented enter[s] and cancel[s] the experience” (LAS 64). Here begins the development of the disengaged posture associated with the American version of “periodization.” Once again highlighting the separation between the lyric voice and the critical voice, Lerner writes in “Didactic Elegy”:

It is difficult to differentiate between the collapse of the towers
And the image of the towers collapsing.
The influence of images is often stronger than the influence of events,
as the film of Pollock painting is more influential than Pollock’s paintings.

But as it is repeated, the power of an image diminishes,
producing anxiety and a symbolic reinvestment.
The image may then be assigned value where there is none.
Can an image be heroic?

No,
But an image may proclaim its distance from the event it ostensibly depicts;
that is, it may declare itself its own event,
and thereby ban all further investment.

The critic watches the image of the towers collapsing.
She remembers less and less about the towers collapsing
each time she watches the image of the towers collapsing.

The critic feels guilty viewing the image like a work of art,
but guilt here stems from an error of cognition,
As the critic fails to distinguish between an event
and the event of the event’s image.

(AY 64)

While the phrase “the towers collapsing” carries more weight with each repetition
within the poem, it also enacts the sort of repetition and reevaluation Lerner describes
as being emblematic of the culture of representation from which he wishes to distance himself. Lerner’s enactment of a culture that repeatedly represents the attacks in aesthetic mediums recalls the earlier sonnet from The Lichtenberg Figures, in which
the lyric voice, “praised for [its] use of repetition” prior to the towers collapsing,
invokes the need for a different style after the attacks, only to fall back into a mode of repetition once again (*TLF* 48). Studying “Didactic Elegy,” the reader—who is the critic of Lerner’s poem—is struck by a mournful feeling that wants, by “an error of cognition,” to equate itself to the actual events of September 11th. By repeatedly “watch[ing] the image of the towers collapsing,” whether online, on the news, or even in a poem, the events themselves lose force in the minds of the individuals who compose the collective. If “the critic fails to distinguish between an event / and the event of the event’s image,” over time they enter into a moment of “pure transition,” in which “one [does] not make contact with the real, but perform[s] such contact for an imagined audience” (*AY* 64; *LAS* 64). Adam associates this state with his third phase, his most disengaged, in which, lacking any emotional traction, boredom is his dominant feeling. In Lerner’s diagnosis, the critic does not reinterpret the events of September 11th, but rather the representations of the events. Adam and the poem’s speaker belong to a present that has entirely lost contact with the real; the American public reviews and reinterprets the violence of September 11th many orders of magnitude removed: with each political speech; with each relevant novel; with each visit to the New York Times webpage; with each update on the American invasion.

Lerner is not describing a static time, or the process of “periodization,” as Adam calls it, but the illusion of a disjunction framed by a way of thinking; it is an American mode rooted in mass media and the state that repeatedly interprets events as disjunctive to justify increasingly violent political responses. In time, these abstracted theories of towers collapsing themselves collapse, over and over, until the entire array of events and counter-events are comprehensible only as an exhausted
category of representation. Lerner is describing a willed ignorance, a self-fulfilling descent into an amplified dislocation. Earlier in *Angle Of Yaw*, he writes:

All across America, from under- and aboveground, from burning buildings and deep wells, hijacked planes and collapsed mines, people are using their cell phones to call out, not for help or air or light, but for information. (*AY* 15)

The word “information” refers, in part, to a genuine desire of the American public to have a better understanding of the construction of their deluded reality, and thus greater control over their cultural circumstance. Experientially, however, “information” is deliberately anticlimactic. It calls attention to the ignorance of the Americans, a people who desire evidence and explanation of their own reality, but who can only receive further delusions that, in turn, motivate increasing detachment. The question is: Is there any way to mourn a culture without reenacting its own delusions?

I think that we should draw a bold, black line across an otherwise white field and keep discussion of its meaning to a minimum. If we can close the event to further interpretation we can keep the collapse from being a masterpiece. (*67*)

If, as Lerner writes, “the key is to intend as little as possible in the act of memorialization,” than by having no care for meaning, a culture can separate from the inert moment of “periodization” and enter into a fundamentally different period, one that touches down in the real, as of yet unknown (*67*). Americans could mournfully represent the attacks of September 11th without replacing their memories of the events. But as Lerner first articulates in the earlier sonnet from *The Lichtenberg*
Figures, this promise inevitably disappoints in poetry, which, like all arts, is necessarily framed by its cultural surroundings, even if unintentionally.

The present, as Lerner writes on the first page of poetry in Angle Of Yaw, in the section called “Begetting Stadia,” is a time of “Demands indefinitely specified, / demands incompatible with collective living” (AY3). It is a time that cannot even mourn its failures in an artistic medium without that medium “resembling its shape / and therefore suggesting its function,” or “repeating its shape / and therefore undoing its function,” both of which undermine the intended aim (3). Lerner’s desired alternative remains unknown, still hindered by a society compelled to repeat its own catastrophes in every action, minor or major. The present age did not begin on September 11th, but on September 11th the American public conceived of a new starting point in its repetitive cycle—the recurring process that disguises itself as narrative disjunction. How might one imagine a moment in poetry that represents its surroundings without affirming its values? In a culture that cannot connect to the real, how does one offer each individual a way of bridging the divide among “us”?
chapter two
A Voice After Voice

In poetry, the notion of collectivity is inherently bound to the lyric “voice,” that disembodied speaker who links the author to the reader across time and space. Consequently, the slow degeneration of American reality into its repeated dislocation should be perceptible within the history of the lyric voice over the course of the second half of the twentieth century. In considering just that, the first half of this chapter synthesizes Lerner’s location within a particular lineage of post-World War II American poets—from John Ashbery, to the Language poets, to Lerner’s contemporaries, a group Christopher Nealon calls the “post-Language poets”—who, reacting to the political, economic, and aesthetic issues of their day, use increasingly unstable modes of voice. Building on this context, the second half of this chapter considers how Lerner draws from their formal tools in his explicitly articulated search for new theories of lyric subjectivity that effectively resist the faults of the contemporary American culture he critiques.

Part One: The Disintegration Of Lyric Subjectivity

One way to read late 20th century and early 21st century American poetry is as a series of engagements with the problem of the lyric voice. Coinciding with a renewed interest in philosophies of language, cultural, political, and economic
upheavals of the twentieth century led poets to diffuse strong lyric voices. The work of John Ashbery, for example—Ben Lerner’s self-claimed forbearer—demonstrates numerous innovative uses of voice, two of which are of particular importance for Lerner’s purposes.  

In much of Ashbery’s writing, pronouns do not act as signifiers for individual people, but as elastic signs with ambiguous referential intention; they are structures that contain different voices and perspectives. Although “I” represents a speaker in Ashbery’s work, it does not imply a continuous presence or persona that can be tracked across a poem. In fact, the most important pronoun in his writing, generally speaking, is the Whitmanian “you” of lyrical address, often positioned with uncertain antecedent, sometimes multiple, sometimes nonexistent. As Ashbery notes of his own poetry in an interview cited by Marjorie Perloff:

The personal pronouns of my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation. ‘You’ can be myself or it can be another person, someone whom I’m addressing, and so can ‘he’ and ‘she’ for that matter…. [We] are somehow all aspects of a consciousness giving rise to the poem and the fact of addressing someone, myself or someone else, is what’s the important thing at that particular moment rather than the particular person involved. (Perloff 258)  

In Leaving The Atocha Station, Adam says that John Ashbery is “one of the only people I [describe] as a ‘major poet’ without irony” (LAS 90). Just moments later Adam claims that Ashbery’s greatest accomplishment is that when reading his work, “mediacy is experienced immediately,” a claim Lerner makes in identical terms in his essay “The Future Continuous: Ashbery’s Lyric Mediacy” (91). In addition to Lerner’s attention to Ashbery’s immediacy as a goal for his own writing, other signs of Ashbery’s influence on Lerner include: the title Leaving The Atocha Station is also the title of a poem in Ashbery’s collection The Tennis Court Oath, which he wrote during his years abroad; the line from The Lichtenberg Figures regarding admiration for “the early work of John Ashbery”; and, of course, from what he has said in interviews regarding Ashbery (Lerner The Lichtenberg Figures 5; Lerner “Small Talk: Ben Lerner”; Lerner "An Interview with Ben Lerner").
The elusive subject matter of any given poem is, in part, an effect of this fluidity—his tendency to write of a moment passing rather than of an event passed, of a poem discovering itself rather than a poem reflecting on the past. “My thought is both poetry and the attempt to explain that poetry,” Ashbery writes, “the two cannot be disentangled” (Ashbery *Other Traditions* 2).

Lerner attends to this remark in an essay on what he calls Ashbery’s “lyric mediacy,” in which he reflects on the effect Ashbery’s poetry has in its readers. “The bizarre power of Ashbery’s best poetry,” Lerner writes, “is that it seems to narrate what it’s like to read Ashbery’s best poetry, and when his work manages to describe the time of its own reading in the time of its own reading, we experience mediacy immediately” ("The Future Continuous: Ashbery's Lyric Mediacy" 209, 03). Lerner interprets this effect as a marker of a mediatory experience that is able to touch down in the real of the present moment.⁷ In Lerner’s reading, Ashbery creates mediacy immediately, in part, by using a complex syntax wherein readers lose track of identifying antecedents, and are repeatedly invited to continue reading for a clarification that never arrives. “Clypsedra,” Ashbery’s most important early long-poem, is one of the first places he uses this type of extended syntax, and from which, Lerner notes, an example can almost be chosen at random:

...We hear so much
Of its further action that at last it seems that

⁷ In her essay “John Ashbery and the Idea of the Reader,” Bonnie Costello argues that one significant way Ashbery is able to push the outside world to the periphery for the duration of a poem, and to create a moment of contact, is by writing with an inclusive “you”: “Accepting the fruitful ambiguity of the second person pronoun, we find that Ashbery’s poetry is not only fictively addressed to another, but actually addressed to us, that at least one very concrete reification of ‘you’ is an actual reader” (Costello 495). She demonstrates that it is Ashbery’s use of the second person pronoun, indeterminately singular or plural, that fashions a connection between his authorial act of composition and the reader’s line-by-line attention to that composition, thus creating for the reader an experience of their present.
It is we, our taking it into account, that are
The reply that prompted the question, and
That the latter, like a person waking on a pillow
Has the sensation of having dreamt the whole thing,
Of returning to participate in that dream, until
The last word is exhausted; certainly this is
Peace of a sort, like nets drying in the sun,
That we must progress toward the whole thing
About an hour ago.

(Ashbery The Mooring of Starting Out 187)

In “Clypsedra,” Ashbery attempts to resist the connotative norms of language from within the structures of discourse; in other words, Ashbery speaks but without certainty of reference. Significantly, though, Lerner identifies this effect in most of Ashbery’s early and midcareer collections, but he does not locate it in Self-Portrait In A Convex Mirror, which he reads instead as Ashbery’s meditation on the limits of his method.

As poets, Lerner and Ashbery are both interested in the role of language in lived experience; they both use visual art as a metaphor for language specifically, and for all mediums of reflexivity more broadly. Both also write about the limitations of their chosen methods within their poetry. The central theoretical difference between Lerner and Ashbery, then, lies in how they each interpret the relationships between language, subjective experience, and the cultural forces that impose an unreality on the preceding two. In Ashbery’s social present, the flexible pronoun is an effect of the flexible identity, of an “ensemble” subjectivity constructed from many different times and places. In “Self-Portrait In A Convex Mirror,” using the pronoun “you” in a

\[8\] Unlike the Language poets I discuss later, Ashbery and Lerner locate these forces in similar places, usually more cultural than explicitly political. They both, for example, are interested in the relationship between film and reality. See Ashbery’s prose poem “The System” from Three Poems, Lerner’s use of a violent, theatrical character named “Orlando Duran” in The Lichtenberg Figures, and almost any page of prose poetry from Angle Of Yaw.
manner that refers simultaneously to Parmigianino—the painter of the eponymous
self-portrait—the reader, and himself, Ashbery asks:

How many people came and stayed a certain time,
Uttered light or dark speech that became part of you,
Like light behind windblown fog and sand,
Filtered and influenced by it, until no part
Remains that is surely you. Those voices in the dusk
Have told you all and still the tale goes on
In the form of memories deposited in irregular
Clumps of crystals…

(Ashbery Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror: Poems 70)

Ashbery recognizes himself in a centuries old painting, and through it he speaks
across time to the painter, who is, in a manner of speaking, Ashbery himself;
made, however, “you” is also the sign of a conversation occurring between Ashbery and the
reader. No matter how one interprets the referent, the addressee “you” is subsumed by
pieces of the social world that then come to structure “your” internal mind. In “Self-
Portrait,” a poem whose pronouns are more heavily inhabited by Ashbery than those
of his previous poems, the “experiences” that structure the individual’s sense of self
are not of the present moment, but “memories” of the ambiguously collectivized
“voices” of a larger culture.

Ashbery’s astonishment upon viewing Parmigianino’s painting comes from
him recognizing his remove from the present, the sort of imprisonment that, like
nature, “is life englobed”; that is, until one comes face to face with the medium’s
distortions, it seems something like being free (68). Searching for the soul in
Parmigianino’s painting, and thus for his soul in his own language—for a way out of
englobed existence—Ashbery’s lyric voice intercedes, “But your eyes proclaim / that
everything is surface. The surface is what’s there / and nothing can exist except
what’s there” (68). What is there, however, is not an individual made of its own experience, but a lyric voice located within its flattened mirror self, structured of memory. Ashbery realizes “the secret,” “that the soul is not a soul, / has no secret, is small, and it fits / Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention” (68). In Lerner’s interpretation, only in the reader’s experience of “mediacy immediately,” which is his or her “moment of attention,” does human depth gain the external validation it wishes, momentarily bypassing the failings of mediated communication. In his insightful reading of “Self-Portrait,” in his book The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century, Christopher Nealon shows that Ashbery’s final question is “how to conclude a poem that has thoroughly probed, and accepted, the conditions of its pseudolife,” a life succumbed “to the spectacle” (The Matter of Capital 100-01). Nealon describes Ashbery’s final turn quite similarly to the point Lerner makes that “Self-Portrait” is less an example of “lyric mediacy” than it is a meditation on its own limits of generating genuine interpersonal meaning:

[There] is something about language that makes it impossible to narrate the work of the system, the system whose distortions mimic language’s.\(^9\) That door opens on to the possibility that englobed existence looks so much like

\(^9\) Nealon’s use of “the system” in relation to Ashbery is intentionally ambiguous, though in a manner that is relevant to understanding that which causes and motivates the undoing of reality for both Ashbery and Lerner. In “Self-Portrait,” Ashbery distinguishes between “the leisure to / Indulge stately pastimes,” which no longer exists in his culture, and “‘play’—Ashbery’s own quotation marks—which exists “in a society specifically / Organized as a demonstration of itself” (Ashbery Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror: Poems 79). The latter half of Ashbery’s comparison is the most relevant description of the experience of living within “the system.” Perhaps definable as capitalism, broadly speaking, Nealon makes no attempt to clarify other than to note that “the system” is “whatever it is” (Nealon The Matter of Capital 103). For Ashbery, “Today has no margins,” that is, no place for internal reflection that does not simply reenact the system of which the person intends to take leave (Ashbery Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror: Poems 79). Between Ashbery and Lerner, this difficulty has become even more noticeable, as mass culture has entrenched itself deeper not simply in materials, but in language, and thus ways of thinking—pushing society from what is often described as a spectacle to a full-blown, indistinguishable simulacrum.
reality, not because it is ‘natural’ in the same sense as language is, but because
the work of the system captures and makes use of something in language.

(105)

By becoming aware that the system imposes its spectacular quality on reality in the
same way that it imposes it on language, Ashbery experiences a moment in which the
artist recedes from the task of mediation back into himself, knowing the space of
reality only in its remnants, as “The hand holds no chalk / And each part of the whole
falls off / And cannot know it knew, except / Here and there, in cold pockets / Of
remembrance, whispers out of time” (Ashbery Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror: 
Poems 82-83). Though “no theory of aesthetic experience can bridge the divides
among ‘us,’” though language itself has been made a surface, Lerner would add that
the poems of Ashbery’s that do utilize “lyric mediacy” serve to distinguish aesthetic
experience and experiences of “us” from experiences of the self (Nealon The Matter
of Capital 106). Redefined in each passing syntactical moment, Ashbery’s lyric voice
grants readers the immediacy of their own experience and, through the flexibility of
its pronouns, generates the implied possibility that each person individually is
experiencing immediacy in their act of reading, even if it is incommunicable. Though
the barrier of interpersonal communication cannot be overcome, there is, despite the
pseudo-life weighing down on language — the system, whatever it is—a generative
potential in articulation for one’s own sense of being extant in the now moving
syntactically across the page.

Of related interest is the disjunctive quality exhibited by some of Ashbery’s
earlier work. Of the varied poets and critics Ashbery has influenced, most, including
Lerner, have developed complex views of Ashbery’s more discontinuous lyricism—particularly of his second collection, *The Tennis Court Oath*, from which Lerner’s novel, *Leaving The Atocha Station*, draws its name. The group known as the Language poets, for example—a roughly defined school that includes Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Ron Silliman, Lyn Henijian, Barret Watten, Bob Perelman, Susan Howe, and Rae Armantrout, among many others—has declared *The Tennis Court Oath* the most important of Ashbery’s collections precisely because the poems it includes leave little room for interpreting them as “lyrics,” that is, as records “of the voice or the mind speaking to itself” (3). For example, take these lines, the opening of Ashbery’s poem “Leaving The Atocha Station”:

> The arctic honey blabbed over the report causing darkness  
> And pulling us out of there experienced it  
> he meanwhile… And the fried bats they sell there  
> dropping from sticks, so that the menace of your prayer folds…  
> Other people… flash  
> the garden you are boning  
> and defunct covering… Blind dog expressed royalties…  
> *(The Mooring of Starting Out 88)*

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10 The exceptions to this rule have also been among the elder generation’s strongest advocates of his work: Hellen Vendler, who wishes to “link Ashbery conclusively to the Western lyric tradition…[of] Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Stevens, Eliot,” and Harold Bloom, who unflinchingly declares, in typical Oedipal language, “Ashbery’s true precursor is the composite father, Whitman-Stevens” (Bloom 185, 8). For a critic of Bloom’s sensibilities, Ashbery’s second collection, *The Tennis Court Oath*, distinctive in how aggressively it resists interpretation, was “an outrageously disjunctive volume” that “attempted too massive a swerve away from the ruminative continuities of Stevens and Whitman” (50-51).

11 In *Leaving The Atocha Station*, Adam, whose life experiences bear close resemblance to Lerner’s own, meditates on the experiences of reading Ashbery. He calls its texture “life’s white machine,” continuing, “Ashbery’s flowing sentences always felt as if they were making sense, but when you looked up from the page, it was impossible to say what sense had been made; while they used the language of logical connection…and the language that implied narrative development…such terms were merely propulsive; there was no actual organizing logic or progression…. His pronouns…created a sense of intimacy, as though you were being addressed or doing the addressing or were familiar with the context the poem assumed, but you could never be sure of their antecedents, person or thing…. The best Ashbery poems…describe what it’s like to read an Ashbery poem; his poems refer to how their reference evanesces” (*LAS 90-91*).
Trying in another way to move beyond the connotative norms of language, Ashbery reduces the disorganized experience of a train ride to mimesis, abandoning all internal observation and description. From the perspective of a reader, the peculiar aspect of *The Tennis Court Oath* is its ability to motivate forward movement through the use of language that seems to refer to nothing but itself, wholly bereft of an external frame of reference. Ashbery’s pronouns are more linguistic items than referents of particular psychological positions. Yet *The Tennis Court Oath* is “his best book,” in the words of Charles Bernstein (Bernstein 433). “It poses for us a radical questioning of established forms,” Bruce Andrews writes in his essay “Misrepresentations” (Silliman *In The American Tree* 497). Foreshadowing Lerner’s later account of the experience of mediacy when reading Ashbery, albeit with a more radical understanding of the detachment of subject from poem, Andrews continues, “yet at the same time, and so appropriately in its own form, it explores the implications of that questioning—not as an idea, but as an experience and a reading…. It has opened rooms, even if Ashbery’s own work has not walked into them (497-498).

Struck by the experience of disjunction, the Language poets took poetry where Ashbery would not. In the introduction to his edited volume *In The American Tree: Language*, Ron Silliman writes that Robert Grenier’s “I HATE SPEECH” manifesto, published in the first issue of *This*, a magazine he cofounded with Barret Watten in 1971, “announced a breach—and a new moment in American writing” (xvii). Silliman continues,

it was the particular contribution of *This*, in rejecting a speech-based poetics and consciously raising the issue of reference, to suggest that any new
direction would require poets to look...at what a poem is actually made of—
not images, not voice, not characters or plot, all of which appear on paper, or
in one’s mouth, only through the invocation of a specific medium, language
itself. (xvii)

Disgusted with the Vietnam War and the ongoing rise of a global version of
American capitalism, the Language poets took the discontinuity of Ashbery’s lyric
voice to its logical extreme—rejecting lyric subjectivity as yet another false mode of
reference, and embracing the artifactual quality of their medium as an experience of
life, rather than a reflection on it.

According to the theories expounded by the Language poets, access to the
experience of their poetry was not limited by the accessibility of reference. In her
essay, “Who Is Speaking?” Lyn Hejinian introduces this question in the context of a
discussion regarding marginalized groups in American society, specifically women.
The question “Who is speaking?” prompts a second question, one that is addressed to
oneself as the speaker of the first, ‘Am I speaking?’” (Hejinian 32). Yet for groups
whose speech has been systematically stifled, this question turns outward, implying
yet another, more necessary question, “Who is listening?” (38). Only if your speech is
heard is the power inherent to voice granted to you as a speaker. And only if you are
connected to the community of discourse can you hear a speaker speaking. To follow
these lines of communication “is to map a social space, a community” (38). She
continues, “If, as a member of a community, one is flourishing, one may not be
inclined to ask questions of it. But if one is not, it is crucial to do so, in order to
discover and accomplish what is to be done” (38-39). Undertaking this task, the
Language poets inaugurated a historical framework through which to understand the relationship between capital and language. For them, the rise of capitalism corresponded to an increased referentiality in language, and in particular, to paraphrase Bruce Andrews in his essay “Code Words,” to a way of thinking about the linguistic voices in discourse as signifiers of constructed, coherent identities (Andrews and Bernstein 54-55). Nowhere is the practice of Language poetry better stated than in Ron Silliman’s essay “Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World,” originally published in Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews’ magazine $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ and later reprinted in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, at the end of which Silliman rises to a moment of quasi-manifesto:

> By recognizing itself as the *philosophy of practice in language*, poetry can work to search out the preconditions of post-referential language within the existing social fact. This requires (1) recognition of the historic nature and structure of referentiality, (2) placing the issue of language, the represented element, at the center of the program, and (3) placing the program into the context of the conscious class struggle. (131)

Ashbery’s poetry provided the Language poets with a way of thinking about the act of writing, and especially the process of reading, as separate from a text’s potential referentiality. They took this anti-subjective notion of poetry and framed it as Leftist critique. As critic Jody Norton explains:

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12 The Language poets wish to break down referentiality in order to conceive of language as a mode of experience in itself, distinct from the social world. Although Lerner does wish to regenerate a space for referentiality in language—resisting a world in which “stars are a mnemonic without object,” as he writes in *The Lichtenberg Figures*—the failure of referentiality he is fighting against is not an effect of a Language school theoretical project, but of yet another incursion of capital into the realms of mass culture, interpersonal space, and language itself (*TLF* 24).
Whereas Ashbery remains interested in strategies of self-determination within language (his last link with the Romantic tradition), Hejinian and the other Language poets tend to view any rhetoric of the self as colonialist in its drive to dominate meaning through voice. They prefer what Bruce Andrews calls ‘a non-imperial or language-centered writing.’” (Norton 296)

They were interested in the materiality of language not as a mediator of meaning, but as meaning—not as a lamp or a mirror, but as its own way of being. Skeptical of the structure of modern identity, weary of confining poetic communication to a certain class or social group, and fearful of the proclivity of capital to overwhelm an aesthetics intended by its practitioners to evade economic subservience, the Language poets disintegrated lyric voice and highlighted internal discontinuity. Even the self-engaged element of Ashbery’s use of pronouns disappears from their work.13

“Without the endorsement of a dominant persona, the language of the poem can be said to speak for itself,” writes Joseph Conte (Conte 44). The lyric “I” is simply a sign of language in process, or as Lyn Hejinian describes it, “that this is happening” (italics her own) (Hejinian 3). In an abundance of unspoken language, or rather, in language that speaks without a speaker, individuals would, theoretically, experience a collective access to meaning, allowing them to define their own selves based on acts of interpretation outside of the dominant modes of discourse.

13 This is an exaggeration made to emphasize the Language poets’ theoretical project abstracted from the poetry they produced. In fact, some of the most widely read poetry today associated with Language writing—including Lyn Hejinian’s My Life and Rosemarie Waldrop’s Lawn Of The Excluded Middle—utilize aspects of voice, while remaining adamant about the lack of a coherent subjectivity behind the lyric “I.” In the introduction to the most recent edition of her trilogy of collections of prose poems, Curves To The Apple (of which Lawn Of The Excluded Middle is one), Waldrop takes a middle road, noting that the “I” and the “You” which dominate the book “are grammatical, as in the lyric ‘I.’ This ‘I’ has lately been confused with the expression of an unquestioned subjectivity and identity. But it simply indicates that language is taking place” (Waldrop xii).
Even in moments in which their use of pronouns is relatively stable and determinable, the Language poets use alternate methods, often theorized separately from their poetry, to create disjunction on the level of the comprehensive unit.\(^\text{14}\) Their contribution to late-twentieth century American poetics can be understood as a set of related arguments “about participatory readership, language and the commodity form, and the decentering of the postmodern political subject” (Nealon “Camp Messianism” 585). Though their avoidance of linearity has made a large number of their poems inaccessible (the irony bites), the Language poets’ writing on poetics, with few exceptions, have become the most studied element of their project, catapulting them from the vanguard to the consciousness of a younger, less ideological, more disparate cohort of American poets.

The “post-Language poets,” as Christopher Nealon calls them, are not a coherent, self-engaged group—ideologically or in terms of location, as could be said of the Language poets and the New York school poets, respectively—but rather, a range of poets with a set of related responses to the present conditions of American life. The group, which Nealon describes in broad strokes in his article “Camp Messianism, or, the Hopes of Poetry in Late-Late Capitalism,” includes Joshua Clover, Kevin Davies, Rod Smith, and Lisa Robertson, among others. Although numerous other critics have also attempted to enumerate constraints that define a “school,” or at least a self-engaged group of contemporary American poets—most

\(^{14}\) I am referring, of course, to Ron Silliman’s famous essay “The New Sentence.” In it he theorizes a set of criteria for evading literary realism (and its related economic modes) at the level of the sentence. Broadly speaking, his criteria include minimizing syllogistic meaning, increasing poetic elements in the internal structure of sentences, and using more ambiguous placement of sentences on the level of the paragraph (Silliman The New Sentence 63-93).
prominently those whom Stephen Burt terms “elliptical poets”\(^\text{15}\)—none is more convincing than Nealon’s category, for whom Ben Lerner’s early work is a close relative. “At the very least,” Nealon argues, “these younger poets are motivated by a very different sense of historical situation—specifically, a different sense of the unfolding of a totalizing political and economic system—than was felt by either the New York school or the Language poets,” though it is a “set of conditions we are still struggling to name, conditions not quite matching the major accounts of the postmodern” (584). As Nealon describes the work of post-Language poets:

> [M]any of the post-Language writers seem to have taken a kind of Frankfurt school turn in their poems, by which I mean not so much that they are crankily denouncing a culture industry—though they may—or critically miming “authoritarian” types of language—though they do—but that they have become invested in a historical story about what Theodor Adorno called “damaged life”…. Unlike Adorno or Walter Benjamin, though, many of the post-Language poets have struck a kind of camp posture towards the “damage” of late capitalism, in a way that borrows from but reinterprets both the messianism of Adorno and Benjamin and the subcultural (especially queer) trajectory of camp.… [T]he post-Language poets, battered by another

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\(^{15}\) Burt’s term “elliptical poetry” originally appeared in his review of Susan Wheeler’s collection *Smokes* for the Summer 1998 issue of *Boston Review*, and then in its expanded form in *American Letters and Commentary* and in Burt’s essay collection *Close Calls With Nonsense* as “The Elliptical Poets”. Though engaging, Burt’s category is critically unconstructive. He identifies formal devices used by a variety of contemporaneous poets, but makes no attempt to articulate the stakes of those devices. Burt catalogues poets, but makes no critical judgment or even statement of personal taste. Of the elliptical poets’ use of the “lyric I,” Burt notes, “Elliptical poets are always hinting, punning, or swerving away from a never-quite-unfolded backstory; they are easier to process in parts than in wholes. They believe provisionally in identities (in one—or at least one—‘I’ per poem), but they suspect the I’s they invoke: they admire disjunction and confrontation, but they know how a little can go a long way” (Burt 346). Perhaps this is true, but towards what aim?
generation’s-worth of the encroachments of capital…expend their considerable talents on making articulate the ways in which, as they look around, they see waiting. (579, 588)

Although the particularities of this “pending” quality of post-Language poems differ for different poets, they are all responding to a culture seemingly on the precipice of an unknowable change.

Given the relentless and continuing encroachment of capital, the post-Language poets are not as willing to trust the “aspectual” reserves their predecessors found in the materials of language as meaning (588). Although the post-Language poets actively utilize voice in their poetry, their pronouns do not necessarily refer to a coherent persona. Rather, they use shifting lyric voices in order to take a camp posture, or “stance,” towards the “pending” quality they each individually perceive in the surrounding culture (597). The Lichtenberg Figures, like the subjects of Nealon’s inquiry, “feel more like models than just instances—models of an aesthetics, at once enacted and theorized, groping for the future in the suffering of its materials” (588).

However, what is waiting in Lerner’s writing is precisely the possibility of a redemptive language that is adequate to the now, a lyric voice that has an acute knowledge of historical change but that is not restricted by it; what is waiting is a desire for a culture and society that engender a deeper, more human language.

Moreover, although tremendously humorous, Lerner’s sonnets in The Lichtenberg Figures do not exhibit the “camp” quality Nealon, especially with regards to its queer, countercultural connotations. Instead, Lerner’s humor acts simultaneously to divide the emotional content of his poems into two competing poles: one motivated
by the dispassionate thinness of its proximate culture, the other by a mournful and deeply felt response to that culture—or rather, by a desire to open up a space in which such feelings could arise. In *The Lichtenberg Figures* especially, the outmoded, overriding aesthetics of dispassion are rendered comedic in order to take a stance that may, with effort, open into a more stable lyric subject.

**Part Two: The Lyric Voice’s Afterlife**

The most visible distinction between Lerner and the post-Language poets is how they situate themselves in relation to their antecedents. While the latter write primarily “in light of the poetic and critical projects of Language poetry,” Lerner primarily writes in light of John Ashbery *through* the Language poets (579). That is, despite the continued encroachment of capital, and while utilizing some of the “aspectual” rhetorical tools developed by Language poets, Lerner more explicitly figures the return of a lyric subjectivity. In his review of the collected poems of Jack Spicer, Lerner, as if he were writing about himself, locates a prefiguration of the dismantling and eventual reconfiguration of lyric subjectivity:

Spicer doesn’t programmatically repudiate lyric subjectivity, then, but considers the subject to be locked in a complicated dance (or wrestling match) with its others. True lyric expression is this struggle itself as it’s objectified in the poem, a poem that is then wrestled with by future readers. In this sense Spicer might be a useful figure for imagining the twenty-first-century afterlife of the lyric following late twentieth-century vanguard critiques of the subject.
Lerner’s particular incarnation of the lyric voice’s afterlife is one that can fight on multiple fronts: pushing through the anti-subjective positions of his antecedents while retaining their formal tools, as well as some of their worries regarding the exclusionary principle of voice; resisting the continued incursion of mass culture, especially in its most recent, post-September 11th manifestation; and generating immediacy for his readers as individuals in a manner that opens up the potential for a renewed experience of “us.” Most importantly, Lerner locates this fight on the page, “objectified in the poem,” between a reader and a text.

Given his position as a poet working after the “late 20th century vanguard critiques of the subject,” Lerner is more invested in locating a space for lyric subjectivity than he is specifically in re-stabilizing the lyric “I” traditionally associated with the use of voice. When he writes in *The Lichtenberg Figures*, “what remains of innovation / is a conservatism at peace with contradiction,” he is, in part, implying that the tools associated with the Language poets’ radical renunciations of voice-driven poetry can be applied to more traditional lyric aims, such as self-determination. In *The Lichtenberg Figures*, Lerner shifts between a wide assortment of individual and collective perspectives in a manner that resembles the Language poets’ “aspectual” toolbox stripped of its ideological commitment; he circles around a distant mode of authorial voice that, like a kaleidoscope or spokes on a wheel, operates a range of vaguely differentiated speaker pronouns. In a single sonnet, for example, the speaker—one or perhaps many—declares itself to be “the lone intern,”

(Lerner "My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer" 93)
“Diego Rodriguez Velázquez,” “a dry / and eviscerated analysis of the Russian Revolution,” “line seven,” “Dr. Samuel Johnson,” and “Charlie Chaplin // playing a waiter embarrassed by his occupation” (TLF 16). What binds all of these speakers together is their textual or artifactual status: “Diego Rodríguez Velázquez” is only available in the present through his canvases or in books written about him; “Charlie Chaplin” is accessible only on the screen or in books; “Dr. Samuel Johnson” is similarly of written history; “a dry / and eviscerated analysis of the Russian Revolution” and “line seven” are the most explicitly textual, the latter in a deliberately meta-poetic reference. In another sonnet, a speaker claims, “I paid Ben Lerner to write you this poem” (31). In this claim, and in line “I am line seven,” as well as in numerous other passages in The Lichtenberg Figures, the speaker reveals that the source of its shifting nature lies in the idea of pronoun as linguistic artifact; the speaker speaks from the page as physical, representative form (16). As referents, the pronouns indicate nothing but their own voice.

This initial mode of lyric subjectivity, what can be called the “textual voice,” is connected to the diagnostic perspective of Chapter One in that it almost exclusively speaks from the past as represented in the present. Like Spicer’s lyric voice battling with its “others” in the future from the “objectified” page, so Lerner’s lyric voice speaks to its readers from the past, and in particular, from the moment of composition when the lyric voice “paid Ben Lerner to write you this poem.” Yet similar to the replaying of old images, a voice that cannot attend to the reader’s present, that cannot create mediacy immediately, merely generates a false assignation of value, and over time, a disengagement from public life. Speaking from the moment of composition,
however, Lerner’s voice already belongs to a disengaged reality; its battle is over a future still arriving, or “pending,” as Nealon would put it.

Struggling with its future readers from its idle past, a lyric voice in the first sonnet of a three sonnets suite at the center of *The Lichtenberg Figures* describes its own present as made of “formative mistakes,” that is, structured by past failures. But apart from the discussion of representation after September 11th in the first chapter, what are the “formative mistakes” of the lyric voice’s present? In an earlier sonnet, Lerner dryly likens recent poetry to images, drawing a line of comparison to anesthetic medicine and the coldness of ironic gesture:

We must retract our offerings, burnt as they are.  
We must recall our lines of verse like faulty tires.  

Poetry has yet to emerge.  
The image is no substitute. The image is an anecdote in the mouth of a stillborn…

If it is any consolation, we admire the early work of John Ashbery.  
If it is any consolation, you won’t feel a thing.  

*(TLF 5)*

This collective retraction of poems by an imagined “academy of poets” for the failures of their art divides representation into two opposing types—the poem and the image, the former of which has an “immediacy” that the latter decidedly lacks. Lyrics in the present can be understood as images insofar as they, like the representations of September 11th in “Didactic Elegy,” force the reader to confront belated representations of an artificial past rather than a present that is real. Emerging images are “stillborn” insomuch as they mediate meaning that does not belong to the real; they are the past continually repeated, poems that enact their own deaths as the
representative substance of their present. If, despite the promise of their vocation, poets, channeling their objectified lyric voices, have only managed to construct images—or, at the very least, are complicit in their culture’s commodified experience of the image in lieu of reality—then there is an implied struggle in *The Lichtenberg Figures*, of which Lerner is intimately aware, between the zany, flat exteriors of his poems and his attempt within them to communicate emotional depth. The former relies on their particular cultural context, complicating the immediacy to which the latter aspires.

Consequently, in the middle three sonnets, as the lyric voice tries to escape its status as remnant of the past, to “let the forgetting begin” and articulate its appeal, it confronts two competing types of irony: the irony of self-skepticism and the irony of trying, impossibly, as linguistic artifact, to refer to something beyond its own textual status. The self-skeptical irony reveals itself in the first sonnet of the middle three as a nostalgia for grander poetic pursuits that are constantly undermined by the lyric voice’s disengaged posture in a present mired in an idle past:

…Reclining on my detention-camp pallet,

I dream in Hebrew of a cigarette
that restores immediacy to the theoretical domain.
Or, if that strikes you as immodest, I purchase a portable classic
and interpret it loosely
until the infinite takes place. Recent criticism understates

the importance of our coffee,
how it removes transcendence from beneath our pillows
and leaves us a pointless enigma or silver dollar in its stead.

The stars are a mnemonic without object.
Let the forgetting begin.

*(TLF 24)*
The desire of the lyric voice for the grander pursuits of the romantic tradition, for “epiphany,” “immediacy,” “the infinite,” and “transcendence,” is rendered ironic by the laziness of its efforts, and the pretentious inflections in its description of its scene. There is an exaggerated contrast between the lyric voice’s idealistic ends and its inactive state, “reclining” and “reading loosely.”

The second type of irony, the lyric voice’s impossible effort to escape its past and attend to its present (and thus, in the act of reading, to the reader’s present) from within its textual or artifactual quality (which is of the past), can be found in the second of the three middle sonnets and in the beginning of the third. Attempting to escape its past, its “formative mistakes,” forces upon it the question of what is “thinkable” given its non-referential language, which eventually leads it back to “text”:

The forgetting begins.
Infinitives are hewn from events.
The letters of your name fall asleep at their posts.
The dead vote in new members. Police declaw your books.
A suspicious white powder is mailed to the past, forcing its closure. In order to avoid exposure, I use the present tense. Sense grows sentimental at the prospect of deferral. The stars dehisce.

By “stars” I mean, of course, tradition, and by “tradition” I mean nothing at all. A pronoun disembowels his antecedent. Stop me if you’ve heard this one before.

Your body is broken by exegesis.
The thinkable goes sobbing door-to-door. (TLF 25)

The thinkable goes sobbing door-to-door in search of predicates accessible by foot. But sense is much shorter in person
and retreats from chamber to antechamber to text.

*(TLF 26)*

In the first passage above, the lyric voice’s records of destruction—of its “forgetting” the “formative mistakes”—are rendered meaningless in the ninth and tenth lines; there, after declaring “The stars dehisce,” the lyric voice reveals that the word “stars” fails to refer to anything—that it remains, as the first sonnet in the sequence called it, “a mnemonic without object” (24). The irony of this failure reads back onto the other claims of the sonnet as well, revealing “the letters of your name,” “new members,” “your books,” and “the past” all to be linguistic items without referents, mnemonics without objects. Thus, in the first stanza of the third sonnet, when “the thinkable,” searches for “predicates”—verb statements that have outside foundations, mnemonics that have objects—it finds nothing but “text.” Like Ashbery’s realization that his medium of representation “is life englobed,” so a genuine despair is here rendered ironic by the obvious impossibility of the entire endeavor (*Self-Portrait In A Convex Mirror* 68). The lyric voice searches for an external structure, but finds nothing but itself.

Nevertheless, as “textual” items, the lyric voices’ pronouns are circulating around a mode of lyric subjectivity that is of its present—the Ben Lerner who it claims to have paid to write the earlier sonnet. Despite his inability to write in the immediacy of his present, the author remains of his present. The language of the poems themselves is only a representation, or as Lerner describes in an earlier sonnet, instances of a technology evolving over time:

Forgotten in advance, these failures are technological in the oldest sense: they allow us to see ourselves as changed and to remain unchanged…
The phrase “technologies / in the oldest sense” suggests either an antiquated definition of the word “technologies” or an early art or craft, of which language could be considered one. Yet even in the former reading, historical definitions of the word “technologies” consistently refer back to language: “A discourse or treatise on an arts or arts”; “the terminology of a particular art or subject”; “the systematic treatment of grammar” (Dictionary "Technology, N."). Thus, “forgotten in advance” is the lyric voice’s reminder that regardless of how technologies of representation—including language—change, subjective individuals “remain unchanged.” The textual lyric voice is merely a grammatical tool, a device bound to time for use by a higher authority, the author, “Benjamin,” who remains a whole person, unchanged, as language changes around him. Arriving at the center of a collection built around a shifting set of voices, the middle three sonnets are talking out to their author, “for Benjamin,” to whom they are all dedicated.

This realization, in which the idle text reaches out to its author as a reminder of his being extant in his moment, is Lerner’s initial sign of hope for the possibility of finding a mode of lyric voice that attends to his present, and therefore to his reader’s present. It is Lerner’s version of a “pending” present, which tangentially or subliminally evokes the currently inaccessible structural potential of language to mediate immediately, itself recalling the potential for a lived experience of the real.

More than offering the dedicatory “For Lerner,” Lerner is asking a mechanical question about language when he inquires, in the very next line (the fifth line) of the final sonnet in the central suite, “How then to structure a premise like a promise?”
If “the thinkable” always “retreats” back “to text,” Lerner is posing a question regarding the underlying logic of text that can be used to indicate an authorial present presently, even if the words themselves cannot. Although Lerner provides examples of this second type of lyric subjectivity, a “structured promise,” in *The Lichtenberg Figures*, it is not until “Didactic Elegy that he fully theorizes the idea:

Formalism is the belief that the eye does violence to the object it apprehends. All formalisms are therefore sad. A negative formalism acknowledges the violence intrinsic to its method. Formalism is therefore a practice, not an essence.

For example, a syllogism subjected to a system of substitutions allows us to apprehend the experience of logic at logic’s expense.

Negative formalisms catalyze an experience of structure. The experience of structure is sad, but, by revealing the contingency of content, it authorizes hope.

*(AY 65)*

In terms of language, a “premise” structured “like a promise” is the presence of individual style in syntax, considered here as the negative structure of language onto which words as content are placed. Ultimately for Lerner, as Norton describes of Ashbery, “syntax constitutes a retaining structure” that contains the potential for an experience of “the expenditure of time” (Norton 287). Unlike Ashbery’s moment, however, Lerner’s time is one in which experiencing mediacy immediately—that is, an experienced expenditure of time—through the vocabularies of his present moment is unfeasible given the social nature of the mediatory process. Language as “image” rather than “poetry” is essentially narrow and fixed in its past.
However, the syntactical impulse does allow Lerner to avoid stable voices while still communicating an individual subjectivity—not simply an authorial presence but a voice in the social world, or as Lerner writes of Spicer’s prefiguration of the lyric’s afterlife, a lone subjectivity “objectified in the poem, a poem that is then wrestled with by future readers” (Lerner “My Vocabulary Did This To me” 93). *The Lichtenberg Figures* is, as one lyric voice refers to the project to which it belongs, “a sketch / sold on the strength of its signature,” an outline, by an artist recognizable for his syntactical style, of a yet-to-be completed project (*TLF* 10). Maintaining the same syntactical structures in both articulations, Lerner here reveals the location of individuality in a language decidedly not his own:


Home considered as a system of substitutions: “Plenty of parking. Deciduous elevators of the genus *Gunplay*, known for their arching bases and serrate pancakes with symmetrical rhizomes.”…

Idle elliptical commitment. Deciduous repetition. Plenty of parking. (*TLF* 41)

Here, specific words are less important than their syntax, revealing the underlying structure of language that constrains the potential for communicating meaning, but which also make the poems recognizably Lerner’s own. Within a single sentence, for example, Lerner often repeats nouns at the end of one clause and at the start of the next. He also tends to repeat adjectives in the same location within two different clauses in two different sections of a single poem. As Cyrus Console writes in his review of *The Lichtenberg Figures*, Lerner demonstrates that “a language is not its
vocabulary but its syntax. The chief implication being that we have not so much a life story as a manner of speaking” (Console). In his ability to communicate despite the idle “textual” quality of vocabulary in his present, Lerner is able to hold out hope, “to structure a premise like a promise,” for a poetry that may, in time, attend to his own, and thus to his readers’, sense of being present in the language now, moving syntactically across the page. He is utilizing what he describes in another sonnet in The Lichtenberg Figures as “the tragic interchangeability of nouns,” whereby syntax anterior to content makes the reader aware of the potential for the real in the material world (TLF 27).16 Within this promise, Lerner is also embedding a hope that the present may change to allow traditional lyric aims to be more directly addressed, shedding the ironic and anaesthetized veils that presently hinder self-conscious discourse. It is, as Adam describes in Leaving The Atocha Station, “a way of touching down, albeit momentarily…[to] be made visible by swirling condensation and debris” (LAS 145-46). In his “structured promise,” Lerner’s second experimentation with lyric subjectivity, he locates hope for an immediacy to return to language, for the real to reappear in the world, for a renewed sense of “us.”

Nevertheless, even if syntax “authorizes hope,” hope “objectified in the poem, a poem that is then wrestled with by future readers” remains provisional, and even conditional, given that “technologies” of mediation are bound to their constantly

16 This phrase, “the tragic interchangeability of nouns,” appears again in Leaving The Atocha Station, at a moment in which Adam at last makes contact with the real: “To attempt to move from one language into another without rotation or angular displacement and to fail in that attempt and call your father from a pay phone weeping or to weep before a painting so one can think of pay phones and of paintings as the same. Now I realize Teresa wasn’t speaking but was humming and playing with my hair but still I heard: To embrace the tragic interchangeability of nouns and smile inscrutably or to find a way of touching down, albeit momentarily, and be made visible by swirling condensation and debris and to know that one pole of experience is always caught up in the other but to know this finally in your body, cone of heat unfurling” (LAS 145-156).
changing, temporally motivated social spaces (Lerner “My Vocabulary Did This To Me” 93). In other words, the intrinsic flaw of a medium, such as poetry, which claims to contain the potential to speak for a collective “us,” is that even if it mediates its author’s present immediately, there is no reason to think that it that will do the same in the present of its future reader. In “Didactic Elegy,” Lerner theorizes an ideal mode of lyric subjectivity, his third type, which would render its mediacy functionally irrelevant. Ashbery’s lyric voice drawn to its “messianic” archetype, the “negative lyric,” as Lerner calls it, would, in the vocabulary of painting, be an image that could be felt and experienced without mediation. Building on the anti-interpretive wishes of the image of the “bold, black line” in the final quote from “Didactic Elegy” in Chapter One, Lerner writes (AY 67):

The heavens are anachronistic. Similarly, the lyric lags behind the subjectivity it aspires to express. Expressing this disconnect is the task of the negative lyric, which does not exist.

If and when the negative lyric exists, it will be repetitious. It will be designed to collapse in advance, producing an image that transmits the impossibility of transmission. This familiar gesture like a bold black stroke against a white field, will emphasize flatness, which is a failure of emphasis.

The critic repeats herself for emphasis. But, since repetition emphasizes only the failure of sense, this is a contradiction. When contradictions are intended they grow lyrical and the absence of the I is felt as a presence.

If and when the negative lyric exists, it will affect a flatness to no effect. The failure of flatness will be an expression of depth.

(AY 66)
Despite the flat plane of the wall or book, paint or language, the “negative lyric” would imply depth; despite the lack of a referential pronoun, the “negative lyric” would speak, or more accurately, it would express without speaking. If it existed, the “negative lyric” would cut through the constructions of power and time in a post-September 11th American reality, allowing “me” to speak to “you” across an objectified language. Barring a fundamental change to the nature of representation, however, the “negative lyric” cannot exist. Lerner approaches the limits of subjective representation given the relationship between textuality and syntax, and there he envisions an impossible language; though this moment in “Didactic Elegy” serves, in part, as an elegy to his language as it exists, the “negative lyric” also sustains Lerner’s wish for an alternate means of representation, one which profoundly, if also realistically, reimagines how an objectified voice speaks across time.
At the heart of all poetry lies the contradiction between what a poet wishes his poems to do, and what they can actually do. The language of poetry cannot transcend the limit of representation the poet wishes it to reach beyond, and so in the process of its articulation it becomes a record of its failure, subjectively inscribed.

...I’m sorry. I was thinking
How the beauty of your singing reinscribes
The hope whose death it announces.

(Lerner Mean Free Path 12)

writes Lerner in Mean Free Path, echoing in his own terms Allen Grossman’s theological definition of the poetic vocation. Grossman’s narrative of poetic creation asserts that a poet is what they make of the impossibility of their task, of their failed attempt at singing a song they do not know.17 In Mean Free Path, Ben Lerner takes

17 Grossman begins The Long Schoolroom: Lessons In The Bitter Logic Of The Poetic Principle at the beginning of all English language poetry, with Bede’s account of Caedmon. He writes, “Caedmon, a seventh-century peasant...ran away from the social firelight when a song was demanded of him...Caedmon ran away because he had no such song and had never had a song of any kind. But later that night he began (impossibly) to sing in a dream. He composed his precisely impossible poem, the precise work of which he knew himself incapable, asleep, in response to a second, mysterious demand by an unnamed (male) person of indeterminate cosmic status...Upon awaking, in the presence of persons of authority in the monastery where he worked, Caedmon remade, again on demand, his poetic text. Then the abbess...of the monastery and her elders took council; and (after the fact) they authorized Caedmon’s vocation” (Grossman 4-5). Grossman’s “poetic principle” is a priori, as all English language poetry extends from an attempt to return to Caedmon’s condition, the receiver of heaven’s song. Upon receiving the blessing of elders, Caedmon himself was reduced to his own circumstance; the elders “abolished by decree the indeterminacy of Caedmon’s calling, identifying the unidentifiability of Caedmon’s vocational master” (5). In his understanding, the “poetic principle” is a “bitter logic” because poetry is “actualized as violence,” by which Grossman means that poetry is always mediated by “the inadequacy of experience” (9, 10). Lerner’s Mean Free Path is deeply influenced by Grossman’s story, and especially by Grossman’s use of the word “virtual” to describe
Grossman’s model from the noumenal and applies it to the experiential, to our predominant cultural systems—what has been described in its different iterations as “postmodernism,” “post-postmodernism,” “late-late capitalism,” etc. In relation to Lerner, the specificity of the term is less important than its threefold manifestation. First is the tendency of said system to actualize, or reify, its contents, to reduce even the most intangible of objects and processes to a material commodity, culturally reabsorbed. Second is the tendency of said system to break apart or fragment, counteracting the process of reification, and leaving its inhabitants without a means of conceptualizing a cultural “whole.” And third is the status of the subject or “self” in this system—at best a weakened entity, reacting to its indecipherable surroundings with subtle oscillations of feeling, and at worst, a pastiched antisubject within an expansive, amorphous state of cultural inaction. If the laborious task of the poetic vocation is to write about a reality that doesn’t exist given the prerequisite knowledge that writing cannot make it exist, then, as Grossman identifies, “In the absence of the invention of new structures, [Hart] Crane’s poetry tends to hallucinate or thematize structures (building, bridge, tower)” (Grossman 89). Analogously, in the absence of a strong emotional subjectivity, political efficacy, or a coherent collective whole, Lerner’s collection reconceives and refigures the logic of his detached and ironic culture to gesture towards different, yet impossible, affective ends, or, what Grossman describes as an “alternative [model] of intelligibility that [does] the work of representation in another way” (11). The poetic potential created by the insurmountable gap between the ideal poem and its formal representation is, for poets’ means of creating moments that artificially break through the limitations of their language. (For a better understanding of what Grossman means by “Virtual,” see his chapter on Hart Crane.)
Grossman, what makes a poem “virtual.” *Mean Free Path* is not Lerner’s unknown song, but it is a musing on the space from which that song could arise; although “the beauty of your singing reinscribes / The hope whose death it announces,” it may also generate a new “virtual” space for recurring occasions of hope and decay (Lerner *Mean Free Path* 12). It may be an “alternative [model]” situated affectively and culturally, rather than theologically (11).

In his chapbook *Topekan Ethos*, published a year prior to *Mean Free Path*, Lerner considers the stakes of a shift away from the emotional distance of his previous collections in relation to a possible return to traditional description and reflection:

> Because I feel I can trust you
> I think it’s a brilliant exposition of a bankrupt Mode: I was here, there, felt stuff, much
> Has been lost, etc. Dozens of great lines, Line breaks especially, but the inner dynamic
> Pokes through. At least remove the incipit At the left margin, on the other hand I like
> Stuttering. Can I trust you to handle a response Worked out over many years in secret
> Us? Maybe you should write about her cancer Towers, and if not, what does that say about
> So that there are stakes to this resistance Englobed if not worlded, speaking the English.

(Lerner *Topekan Ethos* 14-15)

If subjective experience cannot simply be illustrated—“a bankrupt / Mode”—outside of the totalizing effects of capitalism and “postmodernism,” emotionally honest communication must take place through different means, “a response / Worked out
over many years in secret / Us?” (14). Although this sort of unfulfilled emotional communication is, in part, understood to be a private matter, as in an expression of love, it has communal implications, and can be thought of in terms of a hypothetical public—either a collective “us,” or inversely, “her cancer / Towers” (15).

To understand the possible modes of a “virtual” communicative resistance, the terms and stakes of debate must be clearly defined. Insofar as an “affect” is “a feeling or subjective experience accompanying a thought or action or occurring in response to a stimulus,” and also “the outward display of emotion or mood,” then it can be understood as a category of relational, and at times even directional, experiences (Dictionary "Affect, N."). Although not always accomplished, affect implies the potential for communication. Set down in a work of art, however, the relational aspect of the communicative act changes, as the reader or viewer must, to the best of their subjective capacity, interpret the affective aims of an inanimate object, itself invested with a specific orientation towards its audience. In other words, a work of art has what Sianne Ngai calls “tone,” “a global and hyperrelational concept of feeling that encompasses attitude: a literary text’s affective bearing…or ‘set toward’ its audience and world” (Ngai 43). In her definition, it is this outward orientation that allows critics to describe works of art in their own subjective, interpretive terms. “Much more importantly,” Ngai continues, tone is “the formal aspect that enables these affective values to become significant with regard to how each critic understands the work as a totality within an equally holistic matrix of social relations” (43). What this means is that any critical, affective judgment regarding tone in a work of poetry or
prose is necessarily dependent on the affective template of a broader cultural moment.\textsuperscript{18} Emotions outside of that affective template, which itself manages the present moment and any attempt to communicate in it, can only be gestured towards—“a response / Worked out…in secret”—and in that gesture invoke a nonexistent culture based, in part, on those affective terms (TE 14). As such, \textit{Mean Free Path} does not so much emanate the potential for an isolated affective stance as it does “virtually” position itself in relation to the assortment of affects that comprise the experience of a lived subjectivity, including poetic subjectivity.

Lerner’s collection, which is described on its back cover as “both a book of love poems and a book about the difficulty of writing love poems within a commercialized and militarized language,” an acknowledgment of its improbable goal, opens with a poem of explicitly this sort of broader affective positioning (\textit{MFP BC}). “Dedication” is what its title suggests, and as with all dedications, there is a presumption that a name will appear to whom the author feels some personal connection, emotional or intellectual. Yet Lerner’s collection is in search of the possibility for that connection, for a transmission of genuine emotion in an ironic and desensitized world, and as such the name only appears in the last two lines of the fifty-four line poem. The first four stanzas of “Dedication” are instead short reflections on the dehumanized or detached dispositions of different societal spheres: art and commoditization, politics and war, learning and criticism, individuality and

\textsuperscript{18} For purposes of this essay, I am using affect and emotion synonymously. In her Introduction, Ngai includes an informative intellectual history of these two concepts, playing close attention to the ways they have been distinguished from each other over time and between areas of study. Most importantly, emotions have typically been understood to be stronger and more oriented than their affective counterparts. Yet, as she notes, “the intentionally weak and therefore often politically ambiguous feelings in this book are in fact much more like affects…than emotions” (26).
Lerner’s own self. Although the thematic shift at the start of each new stanza corresponds with the arrival of a new emotional subtlety, these affects can all broadly be categorized as emotional acknowledgements of human failure—not failures of Grossman’s “poetic principle,” but rather failures of humanity, or humanness (Grossman 1). Lerner’s stanzas call attention to the high values members of his social stratum place on hyper-intellectualized modes of representation, hierarchical power structures, and commodity culture, just as they highlight the superficiality and absurdity of those values:

For the figure failed to humanize the scale
………………………………
For the mode of address equal to the war was silence, but we went on celebrating doubleness.
………………………………
For the architecture was a long lecture lost on me…
………………………………
For I felt nothing which was cool, totally cool with me. For my blood was cola.

\(MFP\ 5-6\)

The lines themselves demand interpretation yet fail to emote. When an “I” appears in the poem, it is with uncertain spatial location and always at an emotional distance. Its feelings are weak and ironic. Although the types of failures described have different cultural locations and emotional subtleties, they are all moments of noncatharsis. Again and again, they satirize and critique the subject’s inactive mode: “For I was a shopper in a dark / isle”; “For I was a fraud / in a field of poppies”; “For my authority
was small / involuntary muscles / in my face. / For I had some work done / on my face” (5-6). Most importantly, the “I” is not an independent subject; it is merely a pawn in a ubiquitous, yet amorphous cultural logic. It is being acted upon.

In addition to being the traditional dedicatory preposition, Lerner has pointed out that “for” can be read as a coordinating conjunction “in a litany of reasons for despairing of the art,” for contemporary poetry’s inability to grapple with these issues in their current affective states (Lerner "Dedication: About the Poem"). As will become clear, the emotional categories Lerner is exploring in the first four stanzas of “Dedication” are affects of disaffection and subjective dislocation, now reabsorbed into the capitalist system they were initially intended to resist. They are, at best, what Ngai describes as, “noncathartic feelings...[that] give rise to a noncathartic aesthetic: art that produces and foregrounds a failure of emotional release (another form of suspended ‘action’) and does so as a kind of politics” (Ngai 9).

Lerner’s evaluation of contemporary affect in these first stanzas recalls Ngai’s critique of the model made famous by Fredric Jameson in his seminal essay, “Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” and specifically, of Jameson’s widely known thesis of “the waning of affect” in postmodern culture (Jameson 15). While true that the emotions Lerner describes in his opening stanzas are faded and feeble, they are not identical in their distance. Read separately from each other, it is clear that there are, in fact, subtle emotional shifts between Lerner’s stanzas, however impersonal. These first four stanzas are not simply “a liberation from every…kind of feeling” experienced subjectively, as Jameson posited, but rather, in Ngai’s words, “a new set of feelings—one less powerful than the classical
political passions, though perhaps more suited...for models of subjectivity, 
collectivity, and agency not entirely foreseen by past theorists of the commonwealth” 
(Jameson 15; Ngai 5).

Ngai contests Jameson’s hypothesis that the vanishing of our lived historicity 
coincides with a decline in negative affect, not through a rejection of the theory 
outright, but on the terms and examples by which it is defined. What Jameson posited 
was not that postmodern culture is “devoid of feeling, but rather that such 
feelings...are now free-floating and impersonal,” and that this aesthetic mode “itself 
emerged as an elaborated symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived 
possibility of experiencing history in some active way” (Jameson 16, 21). Jameson 
grounded his theory of emotional flattening in the now-hackneyed idea of “the 
disappearance of the individual subject,” and “its formal consequence, the increasing 
unavailability of the personal style” (16). In Jameson’s reasoning, the self has been 
reduced to pastiche, to an antisubject fashioned arbitrarily from dehistoricized 
referents, existing passively within a culture of fragmented inaction. While Jameson 
posit that an inability to organize or fashion a fragmented reality into anything other 
than “heaps of fragments”—the lack of an historical present—produces a subjective 
impotence that reveals itself as “a peculiar kind of [free-floating] euphoria,” Ngai 
points out that a heap is in itself a method of organization based on the concept of 
fragmentation, or the “fragmentary” (26, 16). In her theorization, individuals are not 
free from subjective feelings, as Jameson posited, but rather limited to an array of 
aestheticized and depleted feelings. The self exists, albeit weakened into a state of 
inaction. Even if the self experiences subtle shifts in emotional subjectivity, these
emotions seem far-off, almost separate, highlighting “affect’s surprising ability to produce distance rather than immediacy” (Ngai 83).

Ngai identifies “stuplimity,” defined as “a concatenation of boredom and astonishment—a bringing together of what ‘dulls’ and what ‘irritates’ or agitates; of sharp, sudden excitement and prolonged desensitization, exhaustion, or fatigue,” as the negative affect formed from any attempt to envisage or represent the “heap of fragments” (Jameson 26, 16; Ngai 271). She continues:

The only acts of sense-making allowed by this ‘thick-medium, the basis of all relationships and social organizations, are exhausting ones that tend to culminate in gasps, pants, murmurs, or more quaqua: enumerations, permutations, retraction and emendation, measurement and taxonomic classification, and rudimentary arithmetical and algebraic operations. (Ngai 277)

In essence, stuplimity, not entirely unlike the disjunctive interpretations that cause an experience of “periodization,” is an attempt to make sense of a present too large and too fragmented to coherently comprehend, a process that inevitably breaks down into its own disjointed terms. Although Ngai locates this “ugly feeling” primarily in conceptual and experimental writing of the 20th century, namely texts by Gertrude Stein, Dan Farrell, Kenneth Goldsmith, Samuel Beckett, and the Language poets, her ability to do so implies a “holistic matrix” in which these texts are responding affectively to the culture that surrounds them. They copy the terms of their cultural logic onto themselves, thereby reacting to, and taking a positive (although not necessarily supportive) stance towards the “fragmentary.” Moreover, in Ngai’s
formulation, the affect of stuplimity itself produces another affective state, “a secondary feeling that seems strangely neutral, unqualified” (284). This state is not affectless, but rather an “open feeling” which Ngai insists “makes possible a kind of resistance” rooted in noncatharsis (284).

As an emotional force in “Dedication,” stuplimity has been transposed from linguistic and visual stimuli onto social, cultural, and political issues. Lerner’s supposition that the word “for” can be read as a sort of hinge on which two different, yet related, interpretations of the poem rest, means that the first four stanzas are, quite simply, a desperate and despondent attempt to locate and enumerate the cultural and political problems that are inhibiting political and poetic efficacy. Faced with societal issues with no solution, and not even a means of personal comprehension, and with no outlet for artistic address, all Lerner is left with is stuplimity, a feeling that is a hindrance to action as well as to his artistic aims. Where Ngai locates an “open feeling” that makes a noncathartic political resistance possible, Lerner turns in a different direction. He does not invest these feelings, these failures of emotional release, with the cultural and political efficacy Ngai is quick to defend. He wishes to communicate a grander passion of self, one closer to the classical models of subjective emotion, and particularly political emotion. *Mean Free Path* is attempting and failing to write of a love that cannot be genuinely communicated in the space and language of the idle, ironic present, but which, as Grossman identifies, opens up a new potentiality. If there are to be “stake to this resistance,” as Lerner writes of poetry, they must be made from the language of the present, an “Irony, now warm and capable” (*TE* 14; *MFP* 56).
Though each is distinct, the fifth and sixth stanzas of “Dedication” signal this broader change—a return to the personal, a new set of values for artistic humanism. They initiate Lerner’s attempt to articulate a new communicative, affective stance, with “love” as the possible initial location for a reinscribed catharsis. In the fifth stanza, Lerner writes:

For I was afraid
to turn
left at intersections.
For I was in a turning lane.
For I was signaling,
despite myself,
the will to change.
For I could not throw my voice away

(MFP 6)

Although the poetic “I” in this stanza is markedly more personal than before, and can easily be spatially located, it is still not emotionally forthcoming. It is a sort of distant presence, a hesitant return to one’s own subjectivity. Lerner is not choosing change, but being pushed or drawn into it; it is happening “despite” himself. Yet, as Charles Olson wrote in “The Kingfishers,” “What does not change / is the will to change” (Olson 86). Lerner’s own “will to change” does imply some latent internal potential, albeit one with an uncertain ability to come to fruition. In the sixth stanza, Lerner more clearly defines the collection’s affective stance towards the ironic, noncathartic matrix of emotions depicted in the first four stanzas by representing

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19 This quote is particularly fascinating in relation to Lerner because it appears unlined at the start of Olson’s poem. In Leaving The Atocha Station, Adam notes, “I tended to find lines of poetry beautiful only when I encountered them quoted in prose, in the essays my professors had assigned in college, where the line breaks were replaced with slashes, so that what was communicated was less a particular poem than the echo of poetic possibility” (LAS 8-9). Some of Lerner’s language here is borrowed from Michael Clune’s essay “Theory of Prose,” which first appeared in No: A Journal of the Arts, the publication Lerner co-edited while studying for his MFA at Brown. Clune, it should be noted, was a student of Grossman’s at John’s Hopkins University, which accounts for the similarity between “poetic possibility” and “virtual poem.”
himself in a more emotionally present way. He discloses that he had “overslept,” and that he had prepared for his journey, “the recurring / dream of waking with / alternate endings” \textit{(MFP 6)}. Both of these admissions are moments of intimate recollection. Although their intent is yet undetermined in the collection more broadly, they bring the reader—the public—into Lerner’s bedroom, his private space.

Additionally, Lerner’s “dream” begins to illuminate the relationship in \textit{Mean Free Path} between affect and form. Understood as a reference to the fragmented nature of line throughout the rest of the collection, “alternate endings” are the moments when representation and materiality end and poetic potential begins. These are “virtual” moments in the Grossmanian sense. They never bridge the insurmountable gap, but they dream of its possibility; Lerner is not waking, only dreaming of waking, and not even by his own volition, but with the guidance of another—the “alternate endings / she’d walk me through” \textit{(emphasis added) (6)}. Even the notion, however impossible, of rising above the commodified status of poetic representation is out of Lerner’s control. It is dependent on the “she,” to whom, in a moment of genuine vulnerability, the book is finally dedicated: “For Ariana. / For Ari” \textit{(6)}. As “alternate endings” suggest, throughout \textit{Mean Free Path}, Lerner transposes the symbolic structure of postmodern existence—Jameson’s “heap of fragments,” or perhaps more accurately, Ngai’s “fragmentary”—onto his formal project in an attempt to reframe the underlying social forces that make stuplimity and other non-cathartic emotions possible, as well as produce it in individuals, in a manner that opens up space for different affective ends. By redefining the affective significance of postmodernity’s fragmentation, \textit{Mean Free Path} grants greater
communicatory and cathartic efficacy to Lerner’s own emotional subjectivity. Rather than despair or irony, there are dreams of “alternative endings.” The appearance of the name Ariana at the end of “Dedication” is a sign of the love towards which Lerner is writing. By *towards*, I of course mean in the direction of—not an arrival, but a motion; not a completed or closed project, but the possibility of completion or closure.

The techniques and ideas in “Dedication” develop in a variety of interrelated ways throughout the body of the collection. Formally, fragments of language from the registers of commerce, war, and criticism are recursively juxtaposed in different contexts in an attempt to recover a residue of personal meaning from a language reduced to illegible objectivity—first in a Grossmanian effort to push communicated love towards its transcendent possibility, and then, in an intimately connected mode, to forge a more hopeful path through the grief of linguistic failure. Like the voice whose “singing reinscribes / the hope whose death it announces,” each fragment’s momentary attempt to escape its own cultural and linguistic status is a self-articulated failure (12). Through an accumulation of attempts, Lerner’s collection resists becoming yet another delineated object susceptible to the assimilatory powers of the consumerist vocabularies he is destabilizing. Rather than by falling back into the once evasive, now culturally reabsorbed, technique of extended enumeration used by many of Ngai’s literary examples, Lerner allows for a fixed collection to have many different modes of approach, “several competing forms of closure” (56). His self-defeating hope renewed again in each following line. *Mean Free Path* is what Lyn
Heijinian, in her essay “The Rejection of Closure,” calls an “open text,” one which “emphasizes or foregrounds process, either the process of the original composition or of subsequent compositions by readers, and thus resists the cultural tendencies that seek to identify and fix material and turn it into a product; that is, it resists reduction and commodification” (Hejinian 43). In an effort to articulate “alternative models of intelligibility” outside of the capitalist, militarized vocabularies that dominate his culture, Lerner is seeking out affects beyond stuplimity that do not simply mimic or reinscribe the cultural system they are intended to undermine, but which model an openness with new generative potential (Grossman 11). By attaching our culture’s prevailing vocabularies to a broken line, Lerner is repurposing Ngai’s “fragmentary” in order to resist “reduction and commodification” and point towards a space for different, more expressive, modes of communication. Although love is one of many affects that fit into the category of cathartic emotions that are difficult to write about unironically using the vocabularies that dominate our culture, it is the collection’s primary example. As Lerner notes in two moments of literary metacriticism, his method is to craft multiple paths around a love that is never directly articulated:

I don’t know how else to say it
I mean without writing. Maybe if you let
The false starts stand, stand in for symbols
Near collapse, or let collapsing symbolize
The little clearing love is. Maybe then

(MFP 42)

These are the little
Floating signatures that interest me
Collisions along the path of reference
This time with feeling. What I cannot say is
Is at the vertex. Build your own predicates

(MFP 44)
Each of the passages above grants the reader agency, what Hejinian calls “process,” supplying one approach to reading the collection’s fragmentation. The first calls attention to the language fragments themselves—to their failures, described here as “false starts,” and to the borders they form within which an implied love exists, in all its implications; the second draws the reader to what is not on the page—the gap “at the vertex,” and the unspoken “feeling.”

The structure of an idea revolving around a center which is not there appears in *Mean Free Path* on many different levels—from the collection as whole, to each of the subsections individually, to each stanza alone. Lerner’s form circulates around its “virtual” gesture without arriving, without declaring its fixed state. For example, explore the routes through this stanza (to which I have added numbers to for ease of reference) in relation to the two approaches to reading articulated in the metacritical moments above:

1. There are three hundred sixty-two thousand
2. And that’s love. There are flecks of hope
3. Eight hundred eighty ways to read each stanza
4. Deep in traditional forms like flaws
5. Visible when held against the light
6. I did not walk here all the way from prose
7. To make corrections in red pencil
8. I came here tonight to open you up
9. To interference heard as music

(*MFP* 43)

The large number in the first line may refer directly to love (second line), or to the many paths of reading (third line). If the former, then the next step is to decide whether the flecks of hope refer to the many ways of reading each stanza (third line), the traditional forms (fourth line), or the illuminated truths (fifth line). If the latter, then the next step is to decide whether the many ways of reading each stanza are in
the traditional forms like flaws (fourth line), or are revealed when held against the light (fifth line). Although a traditional close reading of Lerner’s text would be incongruous with its theoretical project, which specifically rejects the oppositional prospects of poetic paraphrasability—“a bankrupt / Mode”—each of the lines in this stanza do allude either to a multiplicity of meaning or to a possibility for new meaning, “And that’s love” (TE 14; MFP 43). Moreover, they situate the reader here and now, “tonight,” as Lerner turns momentarily away from his own process of discovery, with Ariana, “to open you up / To interference heard as music” (MFP 43). The lines’ individual content are clear until held up to the light, at which point suddenly nothing appears stable. From this instability, a form of musical interference, Lerner’s system of “alternate endings” resists the reification of its language, gesturing the reader “virtually” towards love, the collection’s specter, and towards Grossman’s articulation of the unfulfilled, abstract potential of the poetic medium—the possibility of speaking of it, when it is that which cannot be spoken of.

Likewise, though the images in the body of Mean Free Path are diverse, they often refer to conditions of closure and open-endedness, materiality and the possibility of unmediated communication. First, “Ari removes the bobby pins / I remove the punctuation”; then, “Ari removes the bobby pins. Night falls” (13, 16). Neither is a conclusive interpretation of the action or an adequate expression of love; each regards the event with a different context and emotional significance. The first calls attention to the deficiencies of the written word, as well as to Lerner’s desire to evade resolution. The second compares the inexpressible parts of love to the obscured shading of night. Lerner’s love cannot be pinned down. Even the repeated phrases
concerned with war and commerce suggest movement, elusiveness, and a destabilized materiality—“Night-vision green”; “bullets leave their luminous traces”; “In your long dream / money changes hands”—intimating that through an accumulation of fragments over the course of the collection, these images could approach the limits of formal representation as required by language, and especially by a commercialized and militarized language, and as a result move closer to the impossible realization of the virtual dream (MFP 22, 39, 33). The “several competing forms of closure,” also referred to throughout the collection as “The new closure,” is what Grossman calls an “alternative [model] of intelligibility,” here fashioned recursively from the “fragmentary” remnants of contemporary life in the hope of creating a hypothetical space for the unironic communication of love and other cathartic emotions (MFP 56, 23; Grossman 11). As Ari’s voice “reinscribes / The hope whose death it announces,” so the fragments are a fiction, a recursively imagined, yet impossible, mode of expression (MFP 12).

Accordingly, in grappling with how to articulate love, Lerner is also exploring how to articulate grief and loss, his affective counterpoints to Grossman’s belief in the necessary failure of the theological poetic project.

She handed me a book. I had read it before
Dismissed it, but now, in the dark, I heard
The little delays. If you would speak of love
Stutter, like rain, like Robert, be
Be unashamed. Let those who object to the
But that’s familiar rage. It isn’t a system
It is a gesture whose power derives from its
Failure, a child attempting to gather
Us into her glitter-flecked arms

(MFP 19)
Robert is Robert Creeley, whom the collection elegizes, and whose poem “For Love,” referenced here, is a formal model for the stuttering and false starts throughout Lerner’s collection. For Lerner, the gesture of articulated failure configures the unrealized potential for achieving his affective aims. Thinking about love in linguistic terms is a project Creeley took up first, in one of his own attempts at writing a love poem:

Yesterday I wanted to
speak of it, that sense above
the others to me
important because all

that I know derives
from what it teaches me.
Today what is it that
is finally so helpless,

different, despairs of its own
statement, wants to
turn away, endlessly
to turn away.

(Creeley 257)

Lerner and Creeley are each trapped between their desire to address their love, and the embarrassment and despair they feel in doing so in the available vocabularies and cultural locations. Lerner even reminds himself to, “like Robert, be / Be unashamed” (MFP 19). The primary distinction between the two poems is that Lerner is extending Creeley’s project to implicate wider areas of politics and culture. When he writes, “It isn’t a system / It is a gesture whose power derives from its / Failure,” he is deliberately resisting potential critiques of his form that try to force meaning into a closed structure (MFP 19). The image of “a child attempting to gather / Us into her glitter-flecked arms” depicts the emotional “virtualness” imbedded in his form as
genuine and hopeful, albeit disorganized and incomplete (MFP 19). Attempting to overcome his embarrassment, Lerner’s primary question, as was Creeley’s, is how to “speak of it,” how to communicate an affect dependent on an “other,” such as love, in a solitary medium such as writing, and in the tedium of modern daily life (Creeley 257). In love, the mode of address captures pieces or ideas of the beloved—in Creeley, “crossed legs with skirt,” and in Lerner, Ari with her bobby pins—turning them into a fiction, an imagined lover, unavailable, incomplete, endlessly escaping. Rather than love, all that remains are its objectified counterparts. In other words, it is not a matter of whether the lover exists, but rather of how to communicate to her, and not to her images or things, in the available vocabularies. The poet turns away from the scene to invoke and address an absent person, almost projecting, in a sort of solipsism, pieces of the self onto his image of his lover. He dramatizes isolation, always addressing his love for a lover who cannot hear him. Grieving for his loss, Lerner writes, “Ari, pick up. I’m a different person,” and then, “I just remembered / something about Ari” (MFP 29, 26). And again later, taking up Ari’s voice, “Why am I always // asleep in your poems” (30). In the dominant paradigm of the age of Creeley and Lerner, there is neither an adequate vocabulary nor a cultural location for direct statements of love. The best either poet can do is indicate its possibility, its “virtual,” dream-like potential. Creeley’s stuttering is, in this sense, a more expressive poetic model for the communication of love than would be a direct, yet ironic and embarrassed, address. As in Lerner’s Topekan Ethos, love is buried beneath the fragments, or perhaps lost at the vertexes: “Dozens of great lines, / Line breaks especially, but the inner dynamic / Pokes through” (TE 14).
Although the virtual poem Lerner creates is his attempt to communicate the poetic potential of love to his beloved in a moment of deeply personal expression, the communicative act of poetry implies a reader to whom the poem is implicitly addressed. In how it redefines the affective significance of postmodernity’s fragmentation, *Mean Free Path* is also actively including the reader in its project, not only through the braided process of reading, but also through the implied possibility of generating different public emotions. An authentic communication of love in our society would imply the existence of a different “holistic matrix” from the one Ngai and Lerner suggest dominates our culture. The communicatory gesture of love is not complete, nor does Lerner want it to be, as closure would allow the principal culture to reabsorb and diminish his mode of oppositional existence. The virtual poem, however, is a sign of a potential alternate reality built on a template of cathartic, politically effective emotions. There must be “stakes to this resistance / Englobed if not worlded, speaking the English” (15). As Grossman writes, “The interest in ‘poetry’—that is, the poetic principle, of course, nonidentical with poems—is riveting because of the implicit promise…of secular techniques of negotiating the violence within discourse, which means renegotiation of the relation between the individual and the collective” (Grossman 12). Here, Lerner circles back from love and the affective to collectivity and the political. Just as he opens up the possibility for new affective approaches to art and commoditization, politics and war, learning and criticism, and his own self, the project fails, “Parentheses slam shut” (*MFP* 11). Yet even if we, as a society, cannot communicate collectively in a virtual or fictive
manner the abstract potentials of our cultural and political mediums, perhaps we can
grieve communally, each of us individually, virtually together:

    Collective despair expressed in I-statements
    The dream in which the skin is stonewashed
    Denim, running your hand through the hair
    Of an imaginary friend, rising from bed
    Dressing, returning calls, all without
    Waking, the sudden suspicion the teeth
    In your mouth are not your own, let
    Alone the words

    (MFP 18)

Again, as throughout his work, Lerner touches the frame of what is possible in
representation, only to turn and grieve his and his community’s failures. Though
unlike previous moments in his writing, this elegiac voice self-reflexively and
preemptively “reinscribes / The hope whose death it announce” (12)

    In terms similar, though not identical, to his account of the life in the midst of
    “periodization”—repeatedly experiencing the towers collapsing—Lerner proposes an
    alternate reading of recurring violence which serves as a useful contrast: “Maybe if
    you let / The false starts stand, stand in for symbols / Near collapse, or let collapsing
    symbolize / The Little clearing loving is. Maybe then” (MFP 42). Without any
    punctuation at the end of the line, “maybe then” drops off the page, and the
    possibility of what is to come remains wide open. This waiting is in part what Nealon
calls the “pending” quality of the post-Language poets, and in part Lerner’s own
experience of what he refers to as the “lagging” effect of lyric subjectivity. By means
of pure will, the arrival of a lyric voice that can renew the relationship between the
individual and the collective across an objectified language is structurally impossible.
Though for Lerner, its pursuit is a necessity, one he is still working through, and likely will be working through for years to come.
The oddity of writing about a living poet, especially a young and prolific one, is the curious feeling that you are racing against an invisible figure that you are constantly trying to glimpse. Although Lerner has not published a book since *Leaving The Atocha Station* (2011), excerpts of works-in-progress, fiction and poetry, have appeared in an assortment of journals over the past two years. Just as *Mean Free Path* leaves its reader with a latent yet bitter hope for a future still to come, let me here try to do the same with one of Lerner’s more recent poems.

“Dilation,” which originally appeared in *Granta*, is a highly discursive, enumerative poem in long lines. As Lerner noted in an interview regarding the poem, it is structured “around a notion of corporate personhood – not as an antisocial formation for the pursuit of private gain, but in the older sense of a transpersonal subject capable of figuring collective life” (“Interview: Ben Lerner”). Envisaging a future community, the extended syntax of Lerner’s lines produce a cadence that pulls the reader into the “poetic commons” of collective life through what the poem calls “dilation,” a term that refers to when a poet “internalize[s] an allegory” within a poem’s form (Lerner ”Interview: Ben Lerner”; Lerner ”Dilation”). “If you are anything like me,” Lerner’s lyric voice notes from its objectified state, using a “you” that refers capacially to its future readers,

…you emerge from the hospital’s automatic doors into the heat and glare of its parking lot
unable to recall the colour of the rental or the demands of practical reason
You surface from the subway to find it’s fully night and hard to remember the
preceding generation’s claims
for disjunction…

(Lerner "Dilation")

Allegorically speaking, indoors or underground for however long, eventually “you
emerge” and “you surface,” disjunction no longer oppressing your memory. The re-
materialization of night is “your” awakening into your own present, relieved of the
disjunctive forces of “periodization.” Yet in this renewed presence, the decay of
American culture remains; “you” arise from “within the grave air of a masterpiece, its
notes of / ozone and exhaust / jasmine in trace amounts” ("Dilation"). Even if you
desire collectivity, Lerner notes, “The urgency of that desire is certainly heightened
by the threat…of collapsing orders – psychological, societal, etc.”("Interview: Ben
Lerner"). Thus, rather than cleanse the air, Lerner posits the expectant present as
containing both the recently unhindered “exhaust” of the past and the fresh scent of
what is to come. In time, “you,” the reader of Lerner’s poem, will trace “the dilation
of new forms / of private temporality into public architecture,” taking the allegory of
the poem and implementing it in society ("Dilation"). To write a poem, then, is to
write a future, one that cannot exist in your own present, but which you hope your
poem will engender in the passage of time. In poetry, “we” refuse to relinquish hope.
works cited


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