The Post-Modern House Style of American Verse

Ben Lerner and Stickup Poetics

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Ben Lerner, a well-regarded author of ‘experimental’ books of poetry, only began to get noticed in mainstream organs like The Wall Street Journal and The New Yorker when he released a real book, the novel Leaving the Atocha Station. More important for Lerner, at least personally, was the fact that publishing a conventional book meant his in-laws would probably read it. His problem with this is that his narrator, Adam Gordon, reminds a reader a lot of Ben Lerner. Cyrus Console, in an interview with Lerner, summarizes: “both...are from Topeka, both...went to school in Providence, both...have a good friend named ‘Cyrus Console,’ both...received a prestigious fellowship to study in Madrid,” and both are poets. But in interviews Lerner stresses that all the events and characters in the book are imagined, including (Lerner must have to insist at family dinners) his protagonist’s drug use. And yet conflation yields many more interpretive possibilities than obeying Lerner’s insistence of irrelation. Of particular significance: A poem from his first book of poems makes an appearance in the novel as an example of Adam Gordon’s poetry. Lerner’s own comments on what he calls the house style of American postmodern poetry can shed some light on this move. If Lerner thinks of his poetry as fulfilling a ‘type’ of contemporary poetry, then his attribution of the poem to...
Gordon allows him a parallax view of the normative demands of 21st-century American poetry. For readers uninitiated in American postmodern verse, the trends are: a particular combination of critical political/academic language; disjunctive techniques; a nugget of lyrical impulse to talk about things like birds and moonlight; all tempered by irony, which is aware of the anachronistic nature of verse as an art form. This is the style that Lerner feels is ‘the norm’ for an American poet working today.

Lerner exemplifies this postmodern ‘house style’ in a poem from *Leaving the Atocha Station*, which originally appeared in Lerner’s earlier book of poetry called *The Lichtenberg Figures*. Here quoted in full, we can see how the poem repeatedly asserts self-awareness of its ‘poeticity’ and commits to that tone ironically:

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Possessing a weapon has made me bashful.
Tears appreciate in this economy of pleasure.
The ether of data engulfs the capitol.
Possessing a weapon has made me forgetful.
My oboe tars her cenotaph.
The surface is in process.
Coruscant skinks emerge in force.
The moon spits on a copse of spruce.
Plausible opposites stir in the brush.
Jupiter spins in its ruts.
The wind extends its every courtesy.
I have never been here.
Understand?
You have never seen me.
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Each line is self-contained in order to prevent any sense of ‘overflow’ which would allow for an effect of surging or sustained emotion. The narrator is not allowed to gain any sort of momentum as the poem progresses. And what is the “weapon” mentioned by the speaker? A plausible reading can be built around thinking about the weapon as poetry itself. The speaker’s poetic impulse makes him bashful, unable to commit to
the unbroken flow of the poem. And yet, how often is one with a weapon bashful? The bashfulness that the poetic weapon produces is paradoxical: Now that he has this tool which affords him power, he is overly modest. The thing that makes him more powerful also makes him feel like he should deny this power. This speaker soon recovers: We now know that he is both “bashful” and “forgetful,” which seems a more reasonable explanation for the disconnection in the first four lines.

The next line, “My oboe tars her cenotaph,” crystalizes the problem of this poem: How do we, as readers and authors, give ourselves over to poetry? Can we commit to it unabashedly or in any way that isn’t ironic? Can we write a poem and take credit for it? The poet’s work is here represented by the oboe, which both suggests the age-old connection of lyric with music, while also deflating this impulse, as for most Americans the oboe is something you play in middle-school band; it’s one of the sillier instruments Lerner could have chosen. The “cenotaph” which
follows in a heightening of diction could be the poem itself: The poet attempts to memorialize an absent body, but his muscianship/lyricism only serves to “tar” the monument, wiping out any inscription material that could identify who the cenotaph is for. The lyrical memorialization of another only serves to further obscure the intended object of memorialization.

The length of lines appears to lessen near the end, suggesting a kind of trailing-off or loss of enthusiasm. Indeed, after the problems of lyric are summarized, the poem moves into four lines of odd natural description, where the speaker overshoots his diction: “coruscant” drops it down, and “spits” then slides away into critical discourse. A beautiful lyric line like “The moon spits on a copse of spruce” moves directly into a kind of academic jargon—“plausible opposites”—which again modulates into the lyric “stir[ring] in the brush.” The poet makes his somewhat paranoid escape at the end, insisting that he has gone unseen this whole time. Thus the poet escapes the poem, leaving a tarred cenotaph. If the object of memorialization is not visible, then neither is the poet. The poet drops his gun as he backs off, having held the reader hostage for this time.

At this time, I’d like to award points to those at home who were able to discern that this is a sonnet. The Lichtenberg Figures is a sonnet sequence, but in the novel becomes a standalone lyric poem. The removal of the ‘sonnet’ label makes Adam Gordon’s poem less cheeky, but also to some degree less self-aware. Lerner is fully aware that his disjunctive and avant-garde verse is part of a now quite venerable tradition in English-language poetry, and his sonnet label allows him to explicitly hook his poems into the broader poetic tradition. His first book is classified in the Library of Congress under the category of “sonnet
sequences,” so that if someone calls up the list of all the sonnet sequences in the LoC one would see the list run from Dante Aligheri to Ben Lerner. Lerner knows he is writing in a historically determined ‘house style,’ but Adam Gordon probably doesn’t. He has respect for Ashbery, but when he turns to the wider canon he winds up enjoying Tolstoy in the same manner he enjoys Ashbery: the flow of thought into thought, with no real regard for genre.

Adam Gordon treats people in a similar way. He is more interested in the aesthetically interesting array of possibility behind the sentences he hears people speak, as opposed to their content or ethical implications. He speaks the same way he interprets, talking abstractly and disconnectedly in the hopes that people will impart more meaning to the words than he intends. He ultimately treats them and expects to be treated like an Ashbery poem, which makes it very difficult for him to become close to the people he meets. He treats real world, interpersonal interactions as lyrical, and, as his poem indicates, he would prefer it if both the ‘reader’ and the ‘poet’ were to back away slowly. In this case, the poet is as ‘stuck-up’ as the reader.

Lerner eventually makes this explicit. The final line of Gordon/Lerner’s poem reappears in the novel’s regular narration and concludes a section near the very end of the novel. After memorizing pithy quotes about the relationship between politics and poetry, Gordon performs reasonably well on an academic panel under the auspices of the grant he is completing and his status as an American poet. He gets seriously thrown off his game when he is asked to name some favorite Spanish poets, and he comes up with a jumble of names he fears will expose him as ignorant. He attempts to distance himself from the people
he has to engage with afterwards by convincing himself that in a few weeks he will leave and never see any of these people again—that these people do not really matter and that he just has to be disdainful and witty and a poet for six more weeks. The avant-garde style of troubling sequence is a way of hedging the bets on consequence. If poetry doesn’t matter, then why should I try to communicate? This is the destructive formulation of the point of Lerner’s poem: The lines don’t hang together, but consequence still occurs, and meaning is still extractable from the work. This is the saving grace for poems as well as people: People possess this depth, and they still possess meaning despite having thoughts or doing things that might not necessarily follow. Lerner’s novel traces the political and interpersonal limitations of the current poetic habitus, mostly hoping it doesn’t make everyone in it an ass.

WORKS CITED