



Ca' Foscari  
University  
of Venice

## Master's Degree Programme

in European, American, and Postcolonial Languages and  
Literature

“Second Cycle (D.M. 270/2004)”

Final Thesis

**‘A Place for the Genuine’:**

**Ben Lerner's Poetics of Liminality**

**Supervisor**

Prof. Pia Masiero

**Assistant Supervisor**

Prof. Daniela Ciani

**Candidate**

Damiano Schina

**Matriculation Number**

862733

**Academic Year**

2017/2018

## Table of contents

Introduction.....	3
1. From Postmodernism to Post-Fiction.....	6
2. Between Mirrors.....	16
2.1 <i>The echo of poetic possibility</i> .....	17
2.2 <i>Life's white machine</i> .....	28
2.3 <i>Making Things Happen</i> .....	36
2.4 <i>(Born) Between Mirrors</i> .....	49
3. Different Futures.....	60
3.1 <i>Interested in the Octopuses</i> .....	61
3.2 <i>Every atom belonging to me as goods belongs to you</i> .....	71
3.3 <i>How 'Auto' is Autofiction?</i> .....	83
3.4 <i>A novel of the Anthropocene</i> .....	98
Final Considerations.....	109
Works Cited.....	111

## Introduction

In this dissertation, I want to show why I consider American author Ben Lerner one of the most interesting writers of his generation. Lerner began writing fiction after having published three collections of poems, *The Lichtenberg Figures* (2004), *Angle of Yaw* (2006) and *Mean Free Path* (2010). As we will see, poetry plays a vital role in his two novels both thematically and linguistically, granting him what we may call a double sensitivity that gives his prose a wonderful timber. Lerner's first novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, came out in 2011 and gained a certain attention both by the public and by critics. However, it is *10:04*, his second novel, that contributed to make Lerner an important name in contemporary American literature, due also to the excellent reviews that the book garnered.

What drew me to Lerner's writing in the first place was the generic hybridity of his books in which one can find poetry, criticism, photographs but also much more mundane elements, such as anecdotes and apparently uninteresting events taken from real life. This hybridity is also reflected in the fact that Lerner's books are difficult to categorize. They are between fiction and non-fiction, always rooted in an uncanny development of autobiographical elements easily discernible in Lerner's narrators. Moreover, pieces of writing previously published elsewhere by Lerner are inserted into the novels and their authorship is ascribed to Lerner's fictional counterparts. Furthermore, these books are between prose and poetry: both books feature a poet as the narrator and main character, who is presented as writing poems which have been written and published elsewhere by Lerner himself. Ultimately, these books are also between tenses. They are both retrospective accounts of a period in the life of a person, but, as we read them, we feel that we are experiencing the events in the present tense. Lerner's fiction portrays a situation of liminality that does not quite resolve itself, a situation of in-betweenness that both Lerner and his alter egos accept. This acceptance led to the production of these novels that are the object of my study.

This is the perspective I will use in reading Lerner's novels. In the first chapter, I will position Ben Lerner's work in the tradition that preceded him in the panorama of American literature after World War II, talking about the tendencies that characterized U.S. fiction starting from High Postmodernism onwards. I will begin by providing an excursus of contemporary American fiction, describing the different literary characterizations that critics, after Postmodernism, have applied to a specific generation of writers. I will use Post-Postmodernism and New Sincerity to describe the first wave of writers born in the sixties who have been considered part of the "Theory Generation" and I will use the term Post-fiction to define the younger writers of the second wave of this Theory Generation to which, I argue, Lerner belongs.

In the second chapter, I will deal with Lerner's first novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station*. The novel is set in Madrid, where the narrator and main character Adam Gordon is spending a year abroad thanks to a fellowship he won for his poetry. The book is concerned with Adam's preoccupations about aesthetics and with tensions regarding poetry derived from the work of critic Allen Grossman, particularly the preoccupation with "the echo of poetic possibility." This is explored through the engagement with an important American poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, John Ashbery. Another theme of the book is the relationship between poetry and politics and what role poetry plays in the real world. Ultimately, this chapter will focus on Adam's attempt and consequent failure to apply aesthetic ideals to the relationships he has with other people. This leads him to experience situations of displacement that influence his behavior throughout the novel. Adam's position of displacement will be analyzed as the epitome of the situation of American artists after the terrorist attack of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

In the third chapter, I will analyze Lerner's other novel, *10:04*. In this book, Lerner returns to some of the themes and the techniques already introduced in *Leaving the Atocha Station*, but he both expands them and moves away from them. *10:04* is told by an unnamed

narrator who became famous for having written a novel that strikingly resembles *Leaving the Atocha Station*, who got a six-figure deal for a second novel – the one we are reading – and, to complicate things further, who has written a story named “The Golden Vanity,” published in *The New Yorker*, a story whose authorship outside the world of the novel is attributed to Lerner. In the first book the experiences of other characters were filtered through the mind of the first-person narrator; here, even though we still have a first-person narration, readers can feel that there is an openness to other people. There is a movement, as the narrator of *10:04* clearly explains at the beginning, “from irony to sincerity,” which is performed from *Leaving the Atocha Station* to *10:04* that shows a desire to connect with other people. This yearning for communion is explicated in the use of the pervasive metaphor of the octopus and in the discussions about the American poet Walt Whitman, thanks to whom this openness to the other can happen. The use of the techniques of autofiction to blur even more the line between facts and fiction contributes in confusing the distinction between author and narrator, making the latter more humane. For these and many other reasons, I will ultimately demonstrate why *10:04* can be considered a deeply contemporary novel and an example of Anthropocene fiction.

The goal of my thesis is to show how Lerner’s novels depict what it means to be an artist at the turn of the millennium. In fact, I argue that Lerner creates a 21<sup>st</sup>-century version of “a portrait of the artist as a young man,” to paraphrase Joyce’s famous novel, which makes him not only a “promise” of American letters but an already remarkable example of where contemporary literature is going.

## 1. From Postmodernism to Post-Fiction

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Anglophone literature and American literature, in particular, have been characterized by different literary trends and currents that can be more or less identified and categorized. After World War II, the panorama of American letters witnessed the rise of what has been later called “High Postmodernism,” of which writers such as John Barth, Don DeLillo or Thomas Pynchon can be considered as being among the main representatives. According to critic Brian McHale, the transition from Modernism to Postmodernism can be identified in a shift of dominance. Roman Jakobson defines a dominant as “the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components” (82). Thus, McHale argues that postmodernist texts embody a shift from an epistemological dominant to an ontological one. If Modernists asked themselves what did they know and how could they interpret the world they lived in, Postmodernists, on the other hand, asked themselves a completely different question, namely, “Which world is this? What is there to be done in it?” (McHale 10), shifting the dominant from a matter of knowing to a matter of questioning if the world in which they lived was “real.” It must be remembered that this reflects the deconstructive/poststructuralist mood of the period, inaugurated in the United States by the famous lecture “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” presented by French philosopher Jacques Derrida at Johns Hopkins University in 1966.

After Postmodernism, a new generation of writers born around the sixties emerged. Critics are still debating about what to call what comes after Postmodernism, but Post-Postmodernism seems to be the most common term. Among these writers one can mention David Foster Wallace, Jennifer Egan, Jonathan Lethem, Dave Eggers and Michael Chabon. They emerged as a group of writers that, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>, took stock of the ideas that Postmodernist writers advanced and developed a new kind of literature that strived for *sincerity*, as David Foster Wallace writes in his essay “E Unibus

Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.” This led critics to identify these writers also as representative of a literary movement that has been called “New Sincerity.” In his essay, Wallace wrote that, in an era in which the average American watches television for about six hours per day,

The next real literary “rebels” in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that’ll be the point. Maybe that’s why they’ll be the next real rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. Today’s risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the “Oh how banal”. To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. Of willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law. Who knows. (Wallace 81)

Adam Kelly, in his essay “David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity in American Fiction,” suggests that Wallace’s work and the writings of his contemporaries are characterized by a revival and theoretical re-conception of sincerity, something that challenged the emphasis on authenticity that dominated twentieth-century literature and ideas about the self. More recently, and specifically, critic Christian Lorentzen, writing on the website *Vulture*, the cultural blog of *New York Magazine*, has identified new tendencies in recent American fiction. In his 2017 article “Considering the Novel in the Age of Obama,” he calls again into question the idea of

authenticity.<sup>1</sup> Lorentzen writes that a certain number of novels that came out during the two terms of Barack Obama’s presidency – the years between 2009 and 2017 – are, again, concerned with “authenticity, or ‘problems of authenticity’” (n.p.). After the Bush years, “the new problems for the novelist became, therefore, *how to be authentic* (or *how to create an authentic character*) and *how to achieve “authenticity effects”* (or *how to make artifice seem as true or truer than the real*)” (n.p.). Authenticity then, Lorentzen contends, is directly linked to President Obama himself, “whose political appeal hinged on an aura of authenticity and whose opponents attacked him by casting doubt on the authenticity of [his] identity” (n.p.). He then identifies four different trends in the works of fiction published in the United States between 2008 and 2016, namely: Autofiction, The New Meritocracy Novel, The Retro Novel, and The Trauma Novel.

The most interesting “current” that Lorentzen identifies in his article is, in my opinion, the first one, autofiction. “In works of autofiction” – writes Lorentzen – “the line between the author and the protagonist blurs, and the blurring is central to the experience of reading the novel” (n.p.). He considers writers of autofiction Sheila Heti, author of *How Should a Person Be?* (2010), Teju Cole, author of *Open City* (2011), Tao Lin, who wrote the novel *Taipei* (2013) and ultimately Ben Lerner with his two novels *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011) and *10:04* (2014). These novels focus mainly on writers: Lerner’s narrator “speaks in the voice of a relentlessly self-reflexive critic,” Heti’s “in that of a restless bohemian seeker,” and Lin’s “in that of someone trying to reconcile his saturation in life online with real-world connections” (Lorentzen, “Considering,” n.p.). The only exception is Teju Cole’s *Open City*, whose main character and narrator is not a writer but a psychiatry student. According to Lorentzen, Cole’s novel is different in a way because it shows the limits of autofiction: if one writes only about

---

<sup>1</sup> Lorentzen apparently considers the term *authenticity* as a synonym of *sincerity*. He does not distinguish between authenticity and sincerity, such as critics Liesbeth Korthals Altes or Adam Kelly do. Their use of such terms is derived from the seminal work *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972) by Lionel Trilling.



the lives of well-educated middle-class writers, there is little space for violence (n.p.). However, as it will be shown, Lerner's novels, too, deal with violence from a specific perspective.

In 2008, author Zadie Smith wrote an article for *The New York Review of Books* called "Two Paths for the Novel," then republished with some additions by Smith in her book of essays *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* with the title "Two Directions for the Novel." In the article, Smith identifies "two paths for the novel" as represented by two books which were recently published at the time: Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008) and Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2005). These two novels, she argues, "are antipodal – indeed one is the strong refusal of the other" (39). *Netherland* is considered to be representative of that lyrical realism that inserts it in the literary tradition of Jane Austen, George Eliot, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Richard Yates while *Remainder* belongs to the "skewed side road" (47) of the avant-garde, where one can also find writers such as Georges Perec, William S. Burroughs, and J.G. Ballard. Smith, too, talks about authenticity in her essay and argues that both writers, despite apparently having embarked on very different paths, strive for the same thing, which is destroying the myth of cultural authenticity, even though *Remainder* does so for purer reasons than *Netherland*, according to Smith (45). The way they do that is different. *Netherland* is a novel "that wants to offer us the authentic story of a self," (43) while McCarthy's narrator "finds all his own gestures to be completely inauthentic, and everyone else's too" (44). *Netherland* is also an "anxious" novel, a realist novel that "knows that the world has changed" (41) while *Remainder* feels like a kind of "antiliterature hoax" that "meticulously [...] works through the things we expect of a novel gleefully taking them apart, brick by brick" (44). Smith also underlines the fact that the authors of such different novels have actually a shared background: they are both British, they are part of the publishing mainstream, O'Neill went to Cambridge

while McCarthy went to Oxford, and both were “eager to write the Novel of the Future” (45). Smith concludes her argument by writing that both authors discovered,

to their great dismay, that the authenticity baton (which is, of course, entirely phony) has been passed on. Passed to women, to those of color, to people of different sexualities, to people from far off, war-torn places...The frustrated sense of having come to the authenticity party exactly a century late! (45)

Thus, Smith argues that these novels, but especially *Remainder*, show this frustration about having failed to reach authenticity (45). What is interesting about Smith’s article is that she wanted to show what were the possible directions that the novel could take and that she focuses on what these novels try to but fail to do by leaving essentially unanswered the issue of what is more viable.

In this perspective, a possible “third path” for the novel is interesting to consider, “less theoretical and more ambivalent than McCarthy’s anti-novel but somehow just as strident,” as Lorentzen argues in “Considering the Novel in the Age of Obama.” In 2010, writer and literary critic David Shields published a disruptive book entitled *Reality Hunger*. The book became a sort of manifesto for Shields’s contemporaries. In what he calls the “overture” of his book, Shields writes that his idea is to write

the *ars poetica* for a burgeoning group of interrelated (but unconnected) artists in multitude of forms and media (lyric essay, prose poem, collage novel, visual art, film, television, radio, performance art, rap, stand-up comedy, graffiti) who are breaking larger and larger chunks of “reality” into their work. (3)

The book in question is itself an expression of this statement: it is composed of fragments and “borrowed” quotations, that are put on the page and re-modeled to support Shields’s case. One of the targets of Shields’s provocative argument is, as Lorentzen also notices, the issue of fiction and non-fiction: for Shields this distinction is pointless. The “key components” of this new artistic movement, are, according to Shields, “[a] deliberate unartiness: “raw” material,

seemingly unprocessed, unfiltered, uncensored and unprofessional,” “Randomness, openness to accident and serendipity, spontaneity; artistic risk, emotional urgency and intensity, reader/viewer participation” (5). For Lorentzen, the fundamental words here are “deliberate” and “seemingly,” because they convey the somewhat paradoxical idea of “authenticity attained through artifice” (“Considering” n.p.). Lorentzen maintains that even though Shields cites very few examples of contemporary literary fiction in his book – he mentions Renata Adler’s *Speedboat* and Nicholson Baker’s *The Mezzanine* – he concludes nonetheless that Shields definitely saw that something was coming. Quite a few books published after 2010, the year *Reality Hunger* came out, showed that there was indeed a tendency in contemporary American literature, especially regarding the issue of blurring fiction and facts. Lorentzen acknowledged that he was very skeptical about Shields’s book when it was published, yet concedes that “seven years on, there’s no denying that he was a prophet” (n.p.).

A writer who, in some ways, triggered this new interest in autofiction is the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard. In 2012, the first volume of his six-book series *My Struggle* appeared for the first time in the United States and sparked the interest of many critics, among them James Wood of *The New Yorker* and Zadie Smith. Knausgaard’s success in the United States shows a renewed interest in these novels that seem to talk about real events, of things that actually happened, which is part and parcel of the hunger for reality Shields discusses in his book. Günter Leypoldt argues that “Knausgaard’s remarkable *My Struggle* gave to Shields’s concepts a new life by providing a compellingly readable example” (56). Furthermore, the Norwegian writer’s success “helps us retrospectively to appreciate the family resemblances between such diverse works as Geoff Dyer’s *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D.H. Lawrence* (1997), Dave Eggers’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), Sheila Heti’s *How Should a Person Be?* (2010), Ben Lerner’s *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), and Rachel Cusk’s *Outline* (2014)” (Leypoldt 56).

Nicholas Dames, in an article published on *N+I*, uses the expression “The Theory Generation” to describe both older writers also considered to be representatives of the New Sincerity and of Post-Postmodernism such as Jeffrey Eugenides and Jennifer Egan and younger writers like Teju Cole and Ben Lerner. In a similar fashion, Mitchell Huels, drawing from Dames’s article, calls them “Post-Theory Theory Writers.” Huels defines post-theory theory novels as “those contemporary works of fiction, written in the wake of theory’s decline, that use well-known theoretical concepts – for example, the death of the author, the materiality of the signifier, the textuality of the world, the recursivity of reference – without reflexively applying those concepts to the fictional text itself” (282). There are different ways that these novels do this. For example, according to Dames, the books written by these authors are constantly marked by “a relentless analytical drive, oriented toward the slippery nature of signs, [...] but it is a drive described and not reproduced” (n.p.). So, if “theory spent decades revealing the indeterminacy of realism’s ostensibly stable representations” (Huels 282), now, for Dames, realism is having “its revenge on Theory, narrating it as just another part of growing up a college-educated American” (n.p.). According to Huels, realism is not the only thing that connotes the post-theory theory novel; there are also other works that use post-structural theories in order to create new and more experimental literary forms (283). What is important to understand, according to both Dames and Huels, is that these contemporary writers do not deal with theory the way their predecessors did. As a matter of fact, as Huels explains, “authors of post-theory theory novels use the well-known tropes of poststructural theory as the tools and building blocks for various forms of unreal realism, for speculative fictions that contribute to the composition rather than the deconstruction of the world” (283). So, in this sense, this new generation of writers “builds” something beginning from the lesson that theory has provided them, and they are not interested, like Postmodernists, in de-constructing the world, but rather in re-building it or in building a parallel one.

Dames identifies Cole and Lerner to be “younger than the first wave of Theory Generation novelists, and the difference tells. Their novels are even looser in form [...] more solitary and lyrical in their first-person voices, less given to the comedy of social friction” (n.p.). The authors of this second wave of Theory Generation novelists have been defined by critic M.H. Miller as writers of “post-fiction.” “Post fiction” is described as

a chiasmus between the real and the made-up, blurring the two into nonrecognition, confronting a reader with all those issues one is trained by the Western academy not to look for: namely, the author herself, hiding behind the words. It has more in common with the epistolary novels of the 18<sup>th</sup> century than with Don DeLillo. (n.p.)

Miller mentions, among those writers that he calls “the purveyors of post-fiction,” Sheila Heti, Tao Lin, and Ben Lerner, but also older writers such as Lydia Davis and Chris Kraus. These writers break the rules all in different manners. Heti’s book *How Should a Person Be?* “presumably includes actual transcripts of conversations between the author and her friends,” Davis writes, “stories about how she wrote her own earlier stories” while Lerner’s *Leaving the Atocha Station* is “an epic about being bored” (n.p.).

The present work focuses on the two novels written by poet-turned-novelist Ben Lerner, which will be read against the background mapped so far and as exemplary of the contemporary literary trend. In Lerner’s books, but also in Teju Cole’s for example, the author acts like the curator of a museum, who mixes different forms in order to produce a hybrid work of art in which everything is reorganized and put on display on the page. The use of images is very similar to what German writer W.G. Sebald does, in books such as *Austerlitz* and *The Rings of Saturn*. However, photographs are not the only thing that is inserted into these works: poems, essays, and anecdotes from real life, too, are elaborated and juxtaposed one against the other, as in a collage, and put inside a book, which becomes a sort of museum. It is significant that in both Lerner’s first novel *Leaving the Atocha Station* and in his second book *10:04*, there are

scenes that are set in museums. As Lerner writes in his essay published on *Frieze*, “The Actual World,”

I think of the novel as a fundamentally *curatorial* form, as a genre that assimilates and arranges and dramatizes encounters with other genres: poetry, criticism and so on. [...] The novel is an art work in which you can embed other art works – real or imagined – in a variety of thickly described artificial environments in order to test a character’s response. (n.p.)

Ben Lerner’s name is the one that recurs the most when talking about the future of American letters. Perhaps more than Cole’s or Heti’s, Lerner’s name has become the epitome of this new trend in literature. Proposing an argument which is perhaps too extreme, critic Jonathon Sturgeon at *Flavorwire* writes that the publication of Lerner’s work and of his fellow autofiction writers marked “the Death of the Postmodern Novel and the Rise of Autofiction,” something that happened in the year 2014, the year in which both Ben Lerner’s *10:04* and volume three of Knausgaard’s *My Struggle* were published. Sturgeon maintains that what is interesting in these works of autofiction is that “the rise or return of autofiction isn’t the work of a movement, campaign, or vanguard: it’s more of a murmur in the heart of the novel, one that lets us know that literature is alive, still-forming — a living hypothesis” (n.p.). Lerner’s success was unexpected, his first book was published by a small independent press, but ended up selling more than 10.000 copies, according to Lerner himself (Interview with Boris Kachka). The number of articles and amount of criticism that such a short and unknown novel sparked and the consequent publication of *10:04* in 2014 put Lerner under the spotlight. Critics hailed the novel as “a mind-blowing book” (Maurice Corrigan, NPR’s *Fresh Air*), “a book that belongs to the future” (Giles Harvey, *The New York Review of Books*), “the best contemporary work of meta-fiction that I’ve ever read” (Emily Temple, *Flavorwire*) and a book that “signals a new direction in American fiction” (Christian Lorentzen, *Bookforum*). Lerner has been considered “among the most interesting young American novelists” (Dwight Garner, *The New*

*York Times*) and the answer to the question posed by David Foster Wallace in the conclusion of his essay “E Unibus Pluram” about where literature will go next. Alisa Sniderman argues that Lerner is the new embodiment of a fiction writer who can transcend both the “impotent postmodern ironists” and the “sincere ‘anti-rebels’ of the future who’d be backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic” (Wallace 81), signaling a new path for American fiction in the new millennium.

## 2. Between Mirrors

Ben Lerner's first novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, chronicles a year in the life of young poet Adam Gordon. Adam is in Madrid thanks to a fellowship he won for his poetry. He is from Topeka, Kansas and he studied in Providence, at an unspecified Ivy League university. These details seem to be of little importance, but they show a connection between the historical author of the novel and the narrator of the book. There is a blurring of real and invented facts and events that show a position of liminality in which the book tends to situate itself, a condition that is emphasized also by another tension that permeates the book and has to do with Adam's aesthetic ideas. Adam is very concerned about his being a poet, and he derives his ideas about poetry from poet and critic Allen Grossman. In *Leaving the Atocha Station* and more broadly in *The Hatred of Poetry*, Lerner talks about Allen Grossman's notions of the "bitter logic of poetic principle" and of "the echo of poetic possibility." Grossman, in talking about lyrical composition, distinguishes between the virtual poem and the actual poem. As Lerner declares in an interview with Tao Lin in 2011, "poems are virtual for Grossman because there is an unbridgeable gap between what the poet wants the poem to do and what it can actually do" (n.p.). According to this contradiction, poetry is not only difficult but impossible. Lerner poses a sort of solution for this: "a ruthless reading that allows us to *measure* the gap between the actual and the virtual [that] will enable us to experience, if not the genuine poem [...] *a place for the genuine*, whatever that might mean" (*The Hatred of Poetry*, 9, emphasis mine). In this sense, this preoccupation that Lerner has and projects on Adam, is explored through the engagement with an important figure of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the American poet John Ashbery. The influence of Ashbery on the book is extremely important, so much so that the novel is named after an Ashbery poem. Furthermore, the novel deals also with another tension, the one between poetry and politics, or on how poetry can – or cannot – describe and intervene in the real world, if it can "make things happen." This will be shown through the analysis of the main political



event of the novel, the terrorist attack of March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2004 in Madrid, that occurred precisely at the Atocha Station, and the consequences that this attack generated. The terrorist attacks in Madrid will be related to the other terrorist attacks that defined the 21<sup>st</sup> century, namely the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, a topic that was addressed by author Ben Lerner in his poetry. Then, it will be analyzed how and why Adam Gordon fails in applying the aesthetical ideas he has about poetry to the relationships he has with other people, especially with the two women he gets involved with, Teresa and Isabel. Ultimately, it will be seen how Adam struggles with this situation of liminality, of being between facts and fiction, actuality and virtuality, poetry and politics, but in the end learns to accept it, producing the very novel that we are reading, despite his claim that he promised himself “he would never write a novel” (Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, 65).<sup>2</sup>

## ***2.1 The echo of poetic possibility***

The book begins with Adam’s description of the first of what he defines as phases of his research. However, these phases of his project seem to involve barely any work at all. For example, this is how the book begins,

THE FIRST PHASE OF MY RESEARCH INVOLVED WAKING UP WEEKDAY mornings in a barely furnished attic apartment, the first apartment I’d looked at after arriving in Madrid, or letting myself be woken by the noise from La Plaza Santa Ana, failing to assimilate that noise fully into my dream, then putting on the rusty stovetop espresso machine and rolling a spliff while I waited for the coffee. (7)

From this first few lines, we meet Adam, who declares himself immediately as the first-person narrator of the book, and what is described here is his typical morning routine on a weekday during his fellowship. He is talking about his research, which we expect should involve some

---

<sup>2</sup> From now on, if not specified, page number(s) will refer to *Leaving the Atocha Station*.

kind of work, but after the description of this routine made of coffee and smoking hashish, he definitely does not do anything that resembles work. As a matter of fact, he then goes to the Prado Museum, something that he does every day, only to discover that the place he usually occupies every morning, in front of Roger Van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross*, is taken. This is presented as,

A turning point in my project: I arrived one morning at the Van der Weyden to find someone had taken my place. He was standing exactly where I normally stood and for a moment I was startled, as if beholding myself beholding the painting, although he was thinner and darker than I. I waited for him to move on, but he didn't. I wondered if he had observed me in front of the *Descent* and if he was now standing before it in the hope of seeing whatever it was I must have seen. I was irritated and tried to find another canvas for my morning ritual, but was too accustomed to the painting's dimensions and blues to accept a substitute. I was about to abandon room 58 when the man broke suddenly into tears, convulsively catching his breath. Was he, I wondered, just facing the wall to hide his face as he dealt with whatever grief he'd brought into the museum? Or was he having a *profound experience of art?* (8)

In *The Experientiality of Narrative*, narratologist Marco Caracciolo develops the notions of "consciousness-attribution" and "consciousness-enactment." Caracciolo focuses on the relationship between readers and characters and argues that "readers do not just attribute mental states to fictional characters – they attribute mental states with a qualitative aspect [...]. In short, they attribute a consciousness" (112). Beginning from this premise, Caracciolo suggests that, just as we "attribute" a consciousness to real people, we do the same with fictional characters (115-116). We can do that thanks to language, "commonly considered to be a telltale sign of consciousness" (116); thus, how characters behave or what they say are signs that make us attribute a consciousness to them. Nevertheless, Caracciolo continues, it is not that we are sure about the fact that these fictional characters actually have a consciousness "since every linguistic statement only *seems* to express a consciousness; there is no way to *prove* that another human being (real or fictional) is conscious" (117). Hence, "consciousness-attributions are not

based on reasoning, but on the identification of expressions of consciousness” (117). This happens also in literary works, but the initial experience is the character’s and “is created by readers in their interaction with the text” (117). Consciousness-attribution involves the notion of imagining something from a fictional character’s perspective, but, as Hutto notices and Caracciolo underlines, “a consciousness is not a place *from* which we experience the world – it is, first and foremost, the medium *through* which we experience it” (118). Consequently, if we apply Caracciolo’s ideas to the aforementioned paragraph, we can draw a conclusion about Adam and how he experiences things in the novel. In this analysis, I take for granted that fictional characters also attribute a consciousness to other fictional characters in the novel; we readers experience the scene through Adam’s eyes but what happens here is that Adam, too, is having an experience through the stranger. In a sense, the man crying in front of the painting is kind of a surrogate of Adam – he took the place Adam usually occupies every day – and Adam is having an experience as if he sees himself from the outside, thus having also an experience of the work of art the man is looking at and that makes him cry. Adam is attributing a consciousness to the man, as we attribute a consciousness to Adam. Consciousness-attribution in this scene works on two levels: the first is the one in which we readers attribute a consciousness to Adam, the second is the level in which Adam attributes a consciousness to the man crying in front of the painting. What happens next is that a reader can imagine a few things starting from textual cues: she can either see Adam seeing the man or she can see the man, thus identifying with Adam. The first-person narration helps us to have an experience which is closer to the latter – experiencing *through* Adam – what Caracciolo calls “central imagining” (as opposed to “acentral imagining”) which “involves enacting the character’s consciousness – undergoing an imaginative perceptual experience on his behalf” (121). Thus, as we enact Adam’s consciousness, which we had previously attributed to him, Adam enacts the man’s consciousness in what can be defined as a “mirroring:” he says, “for a moment I was

startled, as if beholding myself beholding the painting.” Here, we position ourselves in the deictic center of the character and we can, like Adam, see the man crying in front of the Van der Weyden. In turn, Adam occupies instead the stranger’s deictic center, and this brings him to identify with the stranger. This is what is called consciousness-enactment: we attribute a consciousness to the character, but this happens in tension with our “undergoing of an experience (the story-driven experience)” (Caracciolo 122). In other words, consciousness enactment is a process “best thought of as a meaning of readers’ story-driven experience and of the experience attributed to the character” (Caracciolo 123). It is a cumulative process, in the sense that it builds over time also thanks to the presence of specific textual cues and it depends also on how a character’s experience is similar to ours or if our story-driven experience is similar to the one we attribute to the character (Caracciolo 124). In this passage from *Atocha*, most of us can enact Adam’s consciousness because most of us know what it means to be in a museum and how museums work. Moreover, Adam can enact the stranger’s consciousness due to the fact that he knows what it means to stand there in that specific place in front of that particular painting. In this perspective then, “in consciousness-enactment” – writes Caracciolo – “when readers empathize with the bodily-perceptual experience of a fictional character, there is an overlap between their real body and the fictional body of the character” (132). However, this overlap in *Atocha* happens between, in this case, two fictional characters, but lasts only for a brief moment, as Adam tells us, and he is not experiencing what the man is experiencing because he cannot have “*a profound experience of art*” (8) but only an experience of a “distance, a profound experience of the absence of profundity” (9). On the other hand, the reader’s enactment of Adam’s consciousness is more successful: we enact Adam’s consciousness in the sense that we experience what Adam is experiencing but not what the man is experiencing. Like Adam, we do not have “a profound experience of art” because there are not enough textual clues and details that allow us to have one, but we have textual clues that

suggest the opposite. In this sense, we too experience art, like Adam, “at a distance” (15). What Adam is doing is “experiencing his experience” and what we are doing in this passage is “experiencing Adam’s experience,” not ours, not the man’s.

There is a doubling of Adam’s experience as he projects himself into the man in front of the painting. This projecting and this tendency to use others as mirrors of his own actions characterizes Adam throughout the novel. When Adam is about to leave the room, the man bursts into tears, and this brings Adam to ask himself whether the man was having “a *profound experience of art*” (8). From then on, he begins to ruminate about the fact that he never had a profound experience of art. He says,

I had long worried that I was incapable of having a profound experience of art and I had trouble believing that anyone had, at least anyone I knew. I was intensely suspicious of people who claimed a poem or painting or piece of music “changed their life,” especially since I had often known these people before and after their experience and could register no change. (8)

This comes as a surprise for the reader. The rest of the paragraph makes clear that Adam is a poet and that he won a fellowship for his poems, but how can a poet not know if he had a profound experience of art or what it means to have a profound experience of art? The problem, I argue, lies in the fact that what people think art, and here poetry, in particular, does is not what it actually does, especially for Adam. He writes, “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*” (9, emphasis mine). This notion of “the echo of poetic possibility” must be read alongside with Lerner’s own essay about poetry titled *The Hatred of Poetry* (2016) and we must consider also the literary influences that brought Lerner to develop these ideas about art and poetry.

One of the books which lies behind *Leaving the Atocha Station* and Adam's theories about poetry is *The Long Schoolroom* by Allen Grossman – with whom the narrator shares the initials – as explained also in the “Acknowledgements” section of the book and where the expression “the echo of poetic possibility” comes from. In *The Hatred of Poetry*, drawing from Grossman, Lerner explains the story of the first recorded English poet, Caedmon. According to Bede, Caedmon was an illiterate cowherd unable to sing. Then, one day, Caedmon learns the art of singing in a dream, in which he is visited by an enigmatic figure, who is probably God. God asks Caedmon to sing “the beginning of created things,” and the next morning he wakes up and sings, to his and his fellows' amazement. However, Bede notices and Lerner highlights, “the poem he sings upon waking is not, according to Bede, as good as the poem he sang in his dream. [...] The actual poem Caedmon brings back to the human community is necessarily a mere echo of the first” (*Hatred* 7). Thus, Lerner agrees with Grossman in declaring that poetry is not only hard as many people think, but it is impossible: “In a dream your verses can defeat time, your words can shake off the history of their usage, you can represent what can't be represented [...] but when you wake, when you rejoin your friends around the fire, you're back in the human world with its inflexible laws and logic” (*Hatred* 8). Because of that, Grossman elaborates the concept of the actual and the virtual. In his essay on Hart Crane, he says that the “virtual” poem, comparable to what Caedmon sings in his dreams and the one which is basically unachievable, is opposed to the “actual” poem, the one the poet essentially writes. The poem becomes, in this view, a record of failure. Adam Gordon tends to find poems beautiful only when he encounters them included in prose because what this conveys is not the poem itself, but the poem put in a specific context; it is as if this “echo of poetic possibility” can be perceived from the lines of poetry included in prose. In using Lerner's words, Adam “does find lines of poetry beautiful but what he tends to find beautiful is an abstract potential that's betrayed by actual poems” (Lerner interviewed by Tao Lin 2011).

The notions of potentiality and possibility are arguments that afflicted poets for a very long time. For example, consider Emily Dickinson's "I dwell in Possibility (657),"

I dwell in Possibility –  
A fairer House than Prose –  
More Numerous of Windows –  
Superior – for Doors –

Of Chambers as the Cedars –  
Impregnable of Eye –  
And for an Everlasting Roof  
The Gambrels of the Sky –

Of Visitors – the fairest –  
For Occupation – This –  
The Spreading wide my narrow Hands  
To gather Paradise –  
(*Tutte le poesie* 748-750)

Lerner considers and analyses this poem in *The Hatred of Poetry* and provides an interesting reading. At first, the poem links poetry, again, to this concept of possibility and virtuality. Here, Dickinson is talking about Possibility, with a capital P, but it is not hard to identify this with poetry, as it is opposed not to Impossibility, but to Prose. Poetry is thus considered as "a fairer House than Prose," and it can be compared to Henry James's definition of fiction as a house,

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million — a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least

with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, ensuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbours are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. And so on, and so on; there is fortunately no saying on what, for the particular pair of eyes, the window may *not* open; “fortunately” by reason, precisely, of this incalculability of range. The spreading field, the human scene, is the “choice of subject”; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the “literary form”; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher — without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell you of what he has *been* conscious. Thereby I shall express to you at once his boundless freedom and his “moral” reference. (James 15-16)

Here, James is talking about something completely different from what Dickinson is talking about, namely, point of view in narrative fiction. Different characters see a scene from different windows, and that is what helped James to provide his famous definition of focalization, using the metaphor of the house. However, James’s metaphor of the house of fiction is still relevant to take into account, at least if we consider how Adam interacts with his attic apartment in Madrid. Adam continuously spends time on the roof. As he writes at the beginning,

When the coffee was ready I would open the skylight, which was just big enough for me to crawl through if I stood on the bed, and drink my espresso and smoke on the roof overlooking the plaza where tourists congregated with their guidebooks on the metal tables and the accordion player plied his trade. (7)

And then, later the same day, he would do as follows, “So after I’d dismissed the Quixote, eaten, jacked off, read some Tolstoy, I carried what was left of the wine and the anthology of contemporary Spanish poetry onto the roof and read a few poems by what was left of the light” (20). In this latter scene, Adam stops reading fiction, as represented by Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* and Tolstoy, and commits himself to poetry by climbing onto the roof, where he tells us he is reading Spanish poetry. In this perspective, Adam’s attic apartment in Madrid becomes



literally the house of the poet. He goes outside this house, beyond the real roof, thus having as “an Everlasting Roof / The Gambrels of the Sky,” as Dickinson writes. He literally dwells in Possibility, he escapes the confines of the “house of fiction” and enters into the “house of possibility.” At the same time, Adam looks from the roof to La Plaza Santa Ana,

As night fell La Plaza Santa Ana began to fill with tourists, and one could also see some Madrileños meeting up, kisses on both cheeks, although the locals weren't out in force until much later. You could hear several languages, American or Australian English to me the most grating, chairs scraping the pavement and cutlery scraping plates, glasses being collected from the metal tables or placed there, and usually a violinist, inoffensively unskilled. In the distance airliners made their way to Barajas, lights flashing slowly on the wing, the contrails vaguely pink until it was completely dark. I imagined the passengers could see me, imagined I was a passenger that could see me looking up at myself looking down. (20-21)

Adam has a perspective on the city from the window situated in this roof, he sees people from that specific position, and, as James argues, he is the watcher, the artist who has the consciousness to describe a particular situation from a specific window that gives us his perspective on the world of the novel here expressed by the Plaza Santa Ana, full of tourists.

It is worth noticing that both Dickinson and James use the metaphor of the house to describe two ways of writing, despite not being influenced by the definition the other gave about each genre.<sup>3</sup> Adam is a poet, but he ends up writing a novel, the very one we are reading. So, in a sense, if he climbs to the roof to read and write poetry, from that very roof he has also a perspective on what happens down there and, more broadly, around him. Thus, the “house” can be read as something which has a twofold meaning and both the metaphors that Dickinson and James provide are useful in the case of *Leaving the Atocha Station*.

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Portrait of a Lady*, where James talks about “the house of fiction,” came out in 1881. Dickinson's poems were published after her death in 1886. One might suggest that Dickinson read *The Portrait of a Lady*, but there is no recording of that.

Dickinson writes in this poem that “Possibility,” i.e. Poetry – with a capital P – is a “fairer House than Prose.” Dickinson’s house of Possibility has “for an Everlasting Roof / The Gambrels of the Sky” and it seems much more open to the world and to what is beyond this world. As Uta Gosmann argues,

Dickinson’s “house of poetry” refers beyond itself, to the woods (“cedars”) and to the sky. As a specific language construct, the poem complicates the horizontal and vertical dimensions of language. The poem’s material shape on the page constitutes a spatial construction and therefore an artifact in itself. Its temporal characteristics figure in the form of a succession of lines and stanzas as it becomes manifest in reading. The poem reinforces the vertical element of language: to a greater extent than narrative, it employs figurative language to create multilayered meaning. Its many references echo different periods of the past. Figures of speech, repetitions and sound patterns make back-and-forth references within the poem and emphasize its spatial dimension. The spatial aspect of the poem halts its temporal continuity and complements linear modes with recursive modes of reading. Deciphering a poem involves both its spatial and temporal planes, because the reader must explore its metaphorical depth but also link its elements in consecutive order. (133)

Adam is a poet and his ideas about aesthetics are pervaded by poetry. According to Lerner himself, “[t]he poem dramatizes the impossibility of actuality gathering paradise; the poetic occupation, the poem’s structure asserts, is spreading wide the hands, not containing anything within them (which is what it means to dwell in the porous house of possibility)” (*Hatred* 35-36). Thus, an image of threshold is shown in a poem. Moreover, the “bitter logic of poetic principle,” meant by Grossman as this impossibility to reach the thing itself, what is beyond humanity, is here expressed in the fact that the last two lines of Dickinson’s poem show this specific distance between the actual and the virtual. This distance is felt by the failure of the unexpected rhyming sound of “This” with “Paradise.” In the other two stanzas of the poem, we have a structure of alternate rhymes. In the first stanza, “Prose” rhymes with “Doors;” in the second, “Eye” rhymes with “Sky,” but in the third and last stanza, the short “r” of “This” fails

to rhyme with the long “ar” of “Paradise.” Hence, what we have here, “This,” is the poem itself, but we are certain that what is meant by poetry in “Paradise” is not the same (*Hatred* 36). This distance, this failure to actualize the virtual poem, is here expressed by Dickinson and defined by Lerner as “a mixture of virtuosity and willed dissonance” (*Hatred* 37) and becomes in the novel, the closest way to have that profound experience of art.

In this sense, what Adam says about experiencing at a distance comes to mind, “the closest I’d come to having a profound experience of art was probably the experience of this *distance*, a profound experience of the absence of profundity” (9, emphasis mine). This distance Adam talks about connects to the idea of a gap between what one expects art triggers in the spectator and what it actually elicits. If the reaction to art should be the one that the man in front of the painting is having, and Sheila Heti on *The London Review of Books* emphasizes that this is exactly where the prestige of the museum comes from, then why are the guards on alert? In this sense, the guard’s dilemma as to whether to intervene or not, becomes part of the spectacle. Adam is experiencing a work of art *through* what surrounds this specific work of art, from a distance, seeing everything that happens around these works of arts the man cries in front of. In failing to understand that “profound experience of art,” Adam at least experiences it from a distance. In this sense, Adam turns to the “artifice of real life” (Heti n.p.), to the mundane aspects that surround a work of art, to what happens around it. As a matter of fact, he says that the guard’s dilemma is “more moving than any *Pietà*, *Deposition*, or *Annunciation*” (10). Thus, Adam seems to parallel the experience of looking at a work of art to the experience of reading or writing a book or a poem. This is why *Leaving the Atocha Station* feels, on a superficial level, like a series of notes the narrator jots down during his year abroad, notes for a work of art that is virtually there but cannot be actualized – the epic poem about Spanish Civil war perhaps? – as if the real book Adam wants to write is concealed from us. But this is exactly where its power derives, and everything is done consciously. As Lerner writes in “The Actual

World,” “Literature can function as a laboratory in which we test responses to unrealized or unrealizable art works, or in which we embed real works in imagined conditions in order to trace their effect” (n.p.). In *Atocha*, and in this specific scene, the reaction that a work of art causes in another person seems to be more important than the work of art itself; the experience of the specific painting *becomes* the work of art, thus underling the importance of the experience of this “distance.”

## **2.2 *Life’s white machine***

Sam MacLaughlin suggests that “the poet Adam admires the most – John Ashbery – makes art of this distance” that Adam talks about as “the closest thing” he had “come to having a profound experience of art” (n.p.). Furthermore, even if Adam does not seem to be able to have a profound experience of art, when he reads and talks about Ashbery, he is certainly feeling something. As Lerner notices, “[r]eviewers focus on Adam’s inability to have a ‘profound experience of art’ but ignore the profound experience he has of Ashbery. It is a totally different book, I think, if you consider Adam’s reading of Ashbery to be serious and central or if you think Adam as having no direct experience of poetry” (Rogers 236). Ashbery’s influence on this book is immediately present. The name of the novel itself derives from his homonymous poem that can be found in the collection *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962). Despite not being referenced directly, the poem *Leaving the Atocha Station* is purposely used by Lerner in order to embed Adam’s year in Madrid in both the events that the city suffered that year, specifically the bombing of March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2004, and the poet John Ashbery. Adam Gordon declares his admiration for him since the beginning, as he tells what he has in his bag: “a bilingual edition of Lorca’s *Collected Poems*, my two notebooks, a pocket dictionary, John Ashbery’s *Selected Poems*, drugs” (7). Immediately, Ashbery is namechecked as having a certain importance in Adam’s life. His admiration for the great American poet is explained

later in the novel, while he is on a train to Granada with Isabel, one of the two women he gets involved with in Madrid. He is reading Tolstoy, and while he is doing that, he notices that “every sentence, regardless of its subject, became mimetic of the action of the train, and mimetic of the sentence, and I felt suddenly coeval with its syntax. [...] real time and the time of prose began to merge, and reading, instead of removing me from the world, intensified my experience of the present” (89). Adam’s act of reading Constance Garnett’s translations of Tolstoy allows him to experience immediacy, “a sense of harmony between the rhythms of a reproduction and the real, their structural identity, so that the subject of the sentence was precisely the time of its being furthered” and this is what he appreciates also in what he considers a “‘major poet’ without irony, John Ashbery” (90). What follows is what sometimes happens in reading Lerner’s works. Here, we have a not-so-subtle identification between Adam – the narrator of the novel and a fictional character – and the author himself. What Adam says about Ashbery is part of what Lerner, too, says in an essay he wrote about John Ashbery for the magazine *boundary 2* in 2010. In the novel, some exact words from this essay, entitled “The Future Continuous: Ashbery’s Lyric Mediacy,” are reported and attributed to Adam Gordon. In reading Ashbery, Adam writes, “one could experience the texture of time as it passed, a shadow train, life’s white machine” (90). The expression “life’s white machine” recurs in the novel, and it comes from Ashbery, which used it in an epigraph, but it’s an expression taken from a book called *2A*, by the poets Geoffrey G. O’Brien and Jeff Clark. According to Lerner, “Gordon uses it to represent what’s difficult to represent in the novel: the hum and texture of *time* as it passes, the arc and feel of nondramatic experience that falls outside the geometries of the plot” (Rogers, 233, emphasis mine).

In his *Writing Against Time*, Michael Clune talks about how time affects art and how the passing of time and the tendency to “arrest” time is something that pervades literature. Time is arrested in many ways, and Clune builds his argument around three types of images as

conveyed by literature: the musical image, the addicted image, and the cultured image. He identifies Ashbery's work with that of the cultured image. According to Clune's original interpretation, what is present in Ashbery is "[t]he artifact from another world, the tools of an unknown culture" (*Writing Against Time* 116). In a tendency that goes against what formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky has defined as "defamiliarization," – arguably another way of trying to stop time – Ashbery "seeks to familiarize his images" and his method is "the opposite of the defamiliarization procedure" (*Writing Against Time* 123).

Viktor Shklovsky, in his famous essay "Art as Device," warns about the dangers of automatization, citing an example from writer Leo Tolstoy's diary. Tolstoy ponders whether he had already dusted off his sofa. He writes that, while he was dusting things in his room it was for him "impossible to remember," since "these movements are habitual and unconscious." He concludes then that "if the complex life of many people takes place entirely on the level of the unconscious, then it's as if this life had never been" (Tolstoy qtd. in Shklovsky 5). Shklovsky, beginning from this example suggests that "held accountable for nothing, life fades into nothingness" (5). If we do not notice things as they are happening, if we cannot remember what we do because of habit, it is as if things never actually happened. As a solution, Shklovsky proposes art: "[a]nd so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art [...]. By 'estranging' objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and 'laborious'" (6). Art must make things strange in order to break this form of habit that is created in real life. The reference to Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization as it has been known in literature for many years is present directly in *Leaving the Atocha Station*, too. Adam Gordon, while he wonders whether he would like to prolong his stay in Spain, writes,

There would of course come a point when I would be familiar enough with the language and terrain that it would lose its unfamiliar aspect, a point at which I would no longer see a stone in Spain and think of it as, in some essential sense, *stonier* than the

sedimentary rocks of Kansas, and what applied to stones applied to body, light, weather, whatever. But that moment of familiarization had not yet arrived; why not stay until it was imminent? (163)

Adam is doing something here that he does all the time, and that is applying aesthetic categories to something that has nothing to do with aesthetics, here for example to his future. The mention of the term “*stonier*,” written in italics, is a direct reference to the Russian critic’s famous expression. In this passage, Adam is wondering about when familiarization will arrive, because he is in a foreign country, in a place he does not know, and he is waiting to become familiar with what surrounds him. Thus, this notion of familiarization is much closer to poet John Ashbery than to Shklovsky. As Michael Clune argues in his essay “‘Whatever Charms is Alien:’ John Ashbery’s Everything” and in his book *Writing Against Time*, Ashbery’s poems have the characteristics to make unfamiliar things familiar. At the beginning of his book, Clune talks about the many ways that writers have come up with to make things look “different” in trying to make their works escape the “prison” of time. Defamiliarization as Shklovsky has theorized it is one of these methods. Ezra Pound’s Modernist refrain “make it new” is another one. Clune argues that “the association of literary value with defamiliarization has proved remarkably consistent” and through different literary currents and movements, defamiliarizing procedures seem to be the norm (“Whatever Charms” 447). However, poet John Ashbery has “the value of making the unknown things familiar” and his “poetic career consists of a rigorous and sustained effort to take something you have never seen before and show you what it would look like if you had seen it every day of your life” (Clune, “Whatever Charms,” 448). Clune writes that Ashbery is referring in his poems to a context which is unfamiliar to the reader. The things and the objects he inserts in his poems are “artifacts of another culture,” of “another world which is not available for us readers” (*Writing Against Time* 117).

Ashbery casually puts unfamiliar things, objects, and “artifacts” into his poems, like for example “the lake of a lilac cube” in the poem “They Dream Only of America,” from the

collection *The Tennis Court Oath*. This line references something which seems to be linked to another world which is not the phenomenal world we know. Everyone knows what a lake, a cube, and a lilac are – separately – but put together, these familiar things form an image that is not easily graspable. What is important is that Ashbery creates an image which refers to an unfamiliar context, an image that is “cultured” in the sense that refers to a specific culture, a specific world, which is nevertheless unavailable. In considering his image *as if* familiar to everyone, he creates a new way of trying to stop time, the topic which runs through Clune’s book. Ashbery’s “cultured image” uses a different kind of method in trying to make art immortal than that of defamiliarization techniques, and that is what makes his poetry so timeless. In *Leaving the Atocha Station*, Adam notices that “[Ashbery’s] poems refer to how their reference evanesces,” that “it is as though the actual Ashbery poem is concealed from you” (163). Clune concludes his argument by saying that “Ashbery’s images are not representations of *actual* commodities, but *creations* that selectively and transformatively incorporate elements of actuality in the process of making something new” (*Writing Against Time* 136). Thus, it is as if Ashbery’s images incorporate something which is actual and familiar – the lilac, the cube, and the lake – and create something else which turns out to be unfamiliar and virtual, and that is done on purpose by the poet. These unfamiliar images are created by putting together familiar things and the poet takes for granted that his readers know what he is talking about. Ashbery is able to exploit this tension between the actual and the virtual, the familiar and the unfamiliar, to produce a work of art. He succeeds in creating “a shield against the normal course of perceiving time” (*Writing Against Time* 136). Exploiting this tension between the actual and the virtual is exactly what Adam, and Lerner in a broader context, do with the works of art they produce, for example, the very novel *Leaving the Atocha Station*.



The notion of the actual and the virtual as applied to Ashbery's poems is made explicit by Adam Gordon in reasoning about Ashbery. Time is a topic of concern in Gordon's reading of the poet, too. As Adam says, it is as if Ashbery's poems allow you to "experience your experience," something that evokes the same feeling he has when reading Tolstoy,

The best Ashbery poems, I thought, although not in these words, describe what it's like to read an Ashbery poem; his poems refer to how their reference evanesces. And when you read about your reading in the time of your reading, mediacy is experienced immediately. It is as though the actual Ashbery poem were concealed from you, written on the other side of a mirrored surface, and you saw only the reflection of your reading. But by reflecting your reading, Ashbery's poems allow you to attend to your attention, to experience your experience, thereby enabling a strange kind of presence. But it is a presence that keeps the virtual possibilities of poetry intact because the true poem remains beyond you, inscribed on the far side of the mirror: "You have it but you don't have it. / You miss it, it misses you. / You miss each other." (91)

The "strange kind of presence" is enabled by this experiencing your own experience. During the process of reading, the poem reflects, as a mirror, the reader's own process of reading. The poem itself seems concealed from the reader, but thanks to that sensation, the reader can project his own experience which is mirrored back and made "readable" by the poem itself. As Lerner himself argues in the essay in which some of Adam's very own thoughts are reported verbatim, "The Future Continuous: Ashbery's Lyric Mediacy," Ashbery's poems are

glosses on poems we can't access; it's as if the "real" poem were written on the other side of a mirrored surface: when we read we see only the reflection of our reading. But by reflecting our reading, Ashbery's poems allow us to attend to our attention, to "experience our experience"; they offer what we might call *lyric mediacy*. (209)

So, the best of Ashbery's poetry, for both the author and the narrator of *Atocha*, is a poetry that does not have a specific subject that it is talking about; it is not a matter of the content of the poem, but it is a matter of how the poem is composed through language, through the syntax used by Ashbery, through his use of pronouns. In this sense, form becomes the content and the

very topic of an Ashbery poem. In the essay, Lerner calls this sensation described by Adam, this notion of “experiencing our experience,” “lyric mediacy,” explaining and connecting it to the fact that “For Ashbery, the intensification of the experience of the present is the true political function of poetry, however indeterminate and/or minor that function might be” (209n18). He then offers a reading of the following lines taken from Ashbery’s poem “Litany,”

*Therefore a new school of criticism must be developed.*

*First of all, the new*

*Criticism should take into account that is we*

*Who made it, and therefore*

*Not to be too eager to criticize us; we*

*Could do that for ourselves, and have done so.*

*(Collected Poems 1956 – 1987 603)*

According to Lerner, here “reader and writer are joined in this ‘we,’” because, as it was said earlier, “instead of being a repository for the writer’s experience, the poem enables the reader to experience her own experience” (209). Here Ashbery criticizes the school of criticism that reduces everything to the mere close reading of a poem. As Lerner explains in footnote 19,

Close reading would risk disabling the experience Ashbery so values in Stein and Roussel – ‘the feeling of time passing, of things happening, of a ‘plot,’ though it would be difficult to say precisely what is going on,’ et cetera. An Ashbery poem doesn’t contain some kind of stable literary knowledge, but rather allows us to feel knowledge forming without ever being fully formed. (“The Future Continuous” 210)

This is exactly what one experiences in reading *Leaving the Atocha Station*. The novel feels like a work in progress, a record of Adam Gordon’s thoughts and whereabouts about his life in Madrid, but it is something that makes us “experience our experience,” in the sense that we keep reading not because we are eager to know what Adam does next, but because his thoughts and his actions hypnotically draw us to him. Just like Lerner says in an interview with Delistraty about what an Ashbery’s poem does, the novel “keeps its meaning from being fixed, giving

you an experience of syntax as it unfolds in time” (n.p.). However, we must remember that the novel itself is a retrospective account probably written by Adam when he went back to the United States and therefore has been written “from a distance,” both in space and in time, away from all that happened during Adam’s period abroad in Spain. Yet, the novel creates an illusion of simultaneity, of living Adam’s life as it is unfolding, trying to convey the similar feeling that for Adam the best of Ashbery’s poems transmit. It is the *virtuality* of the work itself and of Adam’s persona that seems to be so fascinating even though Adam may appear as a despicable person and some readers may not take him seriously. In reading about Adam, it is as if we “feel knowledge forming without ever being fully formed,” because the novel does not have a precise structure and it does not show distinctively a development of the character as a typical *Künstlerroman* might do. Even though the novel is concerned with this premise of virtuality, of being a sort of blueprint for the actual work of art that is going to be produced, it must be remembered that it is all done on purpose. After all, this is a novel and a finished product. On the other hand, we do not have a specific closure regarding Adam. The novel leaves readers with an open ending: we do not know what Adam wants to do. As Lerner declared, “Adam Gordon is disappointed in artworks that are merely real, finished, final; Ashbery’s poetry never becomes actual for Gordon, never succumbs to that ‘bitter logic’” (Rogers 236). As Ashbery observes in an essay about writer Raymond Roussel, the “reason for the work’s [...] critical success is the ease with which it can, as the French say, be served with every kind of sauce. From Jean Cocteau to Foucault and beyond, critics who discuss Roussel tend almost unconsciously to talk about themselves” (*Other Traditions* 49). Lerner argues that this is true also for Ashbery himself in talking about other writers. I argue that this holds true for Lerner – and for Adam – in talking about Ashbery. It seems that what Adam and Lerner think that Ashbery does in his poems is exactly what Adam tries to do with his poems and especially with his novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, and what, in a broader context, Lerner does with his

poems and his novels. In talking about Ashbery's poems and poetics, and about poetry and literature more in general, it seems as if Lerner is presenting his own poetics and provides a key to read his own works.

### ***2.3 Making Things Happen***

After having spent the night with Isabel at the end of Part 3 of *Leaving the Atocha Station*, Adam wakes up in a suite at the Ritz, while Isabel is still sleeping, "I WOKE UP IN THE FIFTH PHASE OF MY PROJECT AS IN RESPONSE TO a loud noise. [...] It was still early, rush hour. A few fire trucks passed by on El Paseo del Prado, sirens blaring" (117). Something happened, and the city is reacting to it. Adam wakes up because of a noise and he decides to leave his hotel room, still hungover, to go see what is happening. There has been a terrorist attack at the Atocha Station, and the attack is the one that really happened on March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2004. A "real" event enters the novel and it is directly experienced by Adam Gordon. Everything that Adam sees is a little blurred. We witness what happens around him through his eyes; he is still hungover, and he repeats twice the phrase "it was cloudy" (117). First, he says, "I left the hotel and walked into the sun. Or was it cloudy?" and then he says that "It was cloudy," but it is not clear if he is referring to the weather or to what he calls "the scene of mayhem." Confusion is in Adam's head as it is in the environment that surrounds him, and this confusion experienced by the victims of the attack is experienced by Adam, too, for distinct reasons. What he is witnessing is not clear, he writes, "I saw, I might have seen, a dazed teenager with blood all over his face" (118) and he is tentative from the beginning of this chapter, "People streamed from the various exits, some of them wounded, lightly I guess" (117). Adam witnesses the scene of the attack a few moments after the bombings have happened and this, together with the residues of the alcohol and the drugs of the night before, plus the usual tranquilizers he takes, has caused a greater confusion and sense of displacement

in him: he is not able to talk clearly about what was happening. Thus, he detaches himself completely from the event, going back home and checking news about the attack online (118).

The title of the novel itself, despite coming from a John Ashbery's poem, undoubtedly refers to the bombing. As Mariana Borges argues, "we are pretty much expecting a novel *about* terrorism, and we tend to follow the acts of the protagonist regarding him as an American who had somehow 'lived' the 9/11 event" (6). This assumption, that Adam, simply because he is an American, has in some ways lived and reacted to the "major" terrorist attack of the 21<sup>st</sup> century recurs throughout the novel. Most of the Spanish people Adam meets – both before and after the attacks – question Adam about the role of the U.S. government in Afghanistan and Iraq following 9/11. It needs to be remembered that the bombings of March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2004 are one of the many terrorist attacks that happened after 9/11 and the subsequent U.S. invasion of Afghanistan ordered by President George W. Bush less than a month after the attacks. In an interview with Teddy Wayne for the *Huffington Post*, Ben Lerner explains that,

For Adam part of the experience abroad is re-encountering the American in the form of other tourists or the effects of American-style capitalism and so on. The bombings that take place at the Atocha station on 3/11 are the moment where all of this collides in the novel. On the one hand, the violence is linked to the U.S., is a response to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq which Aznar, an ally of Bush, supported despite its extreme unpopularity with Spaniards. On the other hand, the way that 3/11 becomes a kind of periodizing disaster in Spain, dividing historical time into a *pre-* and a *post-*, and the particular Spanish political response to the events, heightens his sense of foreignness. His reading about what's unfolding around him on English-language news sites in the no-place of the Internet is one figure for how the "American abroad" trope has necessarily changed in step with the reorganization of global space. (n.p.)

It must be added that, after the election that followed 3/11, the socialists won and decided to withdraw the Spanish troops from the Iraq war. So, the terrorist attacks deeply influenced the consequent political events in Spain, but, since Adam is an American, he does not seem to be able to participate in those events. He feels he is not *allowed* to say something about this nor

does he seem to *want* to say something about what is going on. For example, he is at first very torn about what to do, “I said to myself that History was being made and that I needed to be with Spaniards to experience it” (132). However, a few lines later, when he goes to Teresa’s apartment and Carlos, his rival for the “love” of Teresa, tells him that “this must be an interesting time to be an American in Spain.” Adam answers telling him that “it was,” indeed, without understanding what Carlos actually means. The exchange continues, “What did I think, he said. About what, I asked. About everything, he said. I looked off in the distance as though I was making an effort to formulate my complete reaction so simply even an idiot like him might understand. Then, as if concluding this was an impossible task, I said I didn’t know” (133). The weirdness of this “dialogue,” if it can be defined as such, and the preconceptions Adam has of Carlos are conveyed in this passage in which the conversation seems to be in direct speech, but it is reported by Adam without the use of quotation marks. Usually, in the novel, direct speech is reported in quotation marks, but here we do not have them. Perhaps, the author is doing it on purpose, trying to convey Adam’s feeling of not wanting to provide an answer to the questions Carlos asks. He feels uncomfortable, and he wants to speed up the discussion in order to end it as soon as possible. Adam really does not seem to know what to think about the bombings. Here, Carlos is assuming that since Adam is an American *and* a poet who had experienced, even if not directly, 9/11, he has something to say about 3/11. Furthermore, this is connected to the fact that Spaniards could see this attack as a direct consequence of Spanish Prime Minister Aznar’s alliance with Bush and could blame this, in some ways, on “Americans” as a people. During the event in the gallery, Adam is asked by Teresa about the poems of his she is going to translate, but he answers, purely to impress her, that he is “not interested in poetry at a time like this” because “[t]omorrow is the election.” At this point, Teresa asks, “[a]nd what are you going to do tomorrow? [...] How are you going to participate in this historic moment?” and Adam answers with a laconic, “It’s not my country”

(135-136). It is as if Teresa is asking him to contribute to this historical moment with poetry because he is a poet, but Adam cannot do that because he thinks that poems cannot add anything to the political discourse, or rather, cannot “make things happen.”

However, Adam’s so-called “research” delves into politics and it actually seems to have something important to say about it and his relationship with art and poetry. The irony of Adam’s situation is that he is in Spain thanks to a fellowship – not specified which one, but we know from Lerner’s biography that he was there thanks to a Fulbright – which is tied to the U.S. “Empire” that his new leftist Spanish friends do not miss the chance to criticize. Even Adam seems critical of his fellow Americans that he meets in Spain. He is dismissive toward the other American recipients of the fellowship – he barely greets them during his first reading at the gallery (42) – and he talks badly about the tourists or the other American expats he encounters. Yet, in talking about them, Adam talks also about himself. He writes, “My look [...] accused them as if I were a writer in flight from a repressive regime, rather than one of its most fraudulent grantees” (48). He feels closer to the poets he should focus his project on, but this identification is completely wrong, as he also recognizes. Adam’s project consists in writing “a long, research-driven poem exploring the [Spanish Civil] war’s literary legacy,” something he does not know anything about, but which meant a lot “for a generation of writers, few of whom [he] had read” (23). This is how Adam describes for the first time his “official” research to Arturo, Teresa’s brother, after they meet in a bar. Adam says that the answer he gave was “a version of the answer I had memorized for my Spanish exam in Providence, a long answer composed by a fluent friend” (23). Thus, Adam sets out to write about something he knows next to nothing about, in a country whose history he barely knows, surrounded by people who speak a language in which he is not fluent. He says he does not want to be fluent in Spanish because he is scared that if he becomes fluent, he may lose status in the eyes of his new Spanish friends and reveal himself for what he really is, a fraud. Furthermore, he does not seem to want

to have anything to do with the political events that affect Spain. Even Isabel, when Adam tells her about the purpose of his research, asks, “What makes the poem an effective form for a historical investigation?” (49) and from then on, Adam surprisingly finds himself unable “to defend a project I’d never clearly delineated, let alone ever planned to complete” (50). What follows is an exchange between Adam and Isabel about why he is studying Franco and Spain and not Bush and America. Isabel concludes by telling him that she is “sure that the people of Iraq are looking forward to your poem about Franco and the economy” (50). Isabel dismisses Adam’s project, a project he never even began, and Adam is disturbed and scared by the fact that “our exchange, despite my best efforts, and perhaps for the first time, had involved much more of the actual than of the virtual” (50-51). Adam is scared because he feels he is on the brink of being discovered as a fraud.

Despite his fears, Adam does seem to have insightful ideas about how to react to the attacks, showing perhaps that he is not who we think he says he is. In fact, after 3/11, when he goes back to the gallery with Arturo, he makes him a proposal: “I heard myself saying that he should cover one of the larger paintings with a black cloth as a memorial, a visual moment of silence” (121). Thus, even if Adam seems not to want to participate in what follows the attacks, he still suggests doing something, even if this something he proposes does not do anything in the actual world, exactly like writing and reading poems. However, it is worth stressing that he does not seem to be really sure of what he is proposing since he “hears himself” saying something, as if the covering of the painting is casually proposed by Adam in order to justify his question about whether or not Arturo was opening the gallery that night. This is part and parcel of Adam’s disconnection with everything and this is shown by the effect that the covered painting causes. In fact, Adam’s proposal becomes “contemporary art” and “it didn’t look like a covered painting from the nineteenth century” (139), as perhaps Adam wanted it to look like. The effect that he wanted the covered painting to have, the memorial, the “visual moment of



silence,” falls back into the logic of the exploitation of a tragedy in the perspective of the market. As a matter of fact, after the covering of the painting Teresa wonders whether it will still sell (124). Moreover, Arturo is interviewed by a reporter, “presumably about the covered painting” and the gallery is full of people, so the covering of the painting does have an impact and contributes to the success of Arturo’s gallery. Yet, this success is derived from the exploitation of a tragedy. Adam suggested the gesture as a memorial to the victims of the attack, this “visual moment of silence” that, despite the efforts, cannot escape the capitalist society in which this work of art has been created. The irony is that Teresa and Arturo, despite being described as rich or at least well-off people, find themselves closer to the left and very critical of capitalism, but as this example shows, they cannot escape the logic of it. What Adam proposes, probably because he is convinced that there is something that goes beyond the pure logic of the world he lives in, fails to have the desired effect, and in the actual world, his idea even enhances the value of the painting. Matters of money become part of the fundamental idea for this gesture to be a memorial, “a visual moment of silence.” This is an example of the already mentioned fear that Adam has of the actual. As Lerner argues in talking about this episode, “[a]gain and again, the art object is displaced into a field of relations or rendered conceptual as a kind of defense against Adam’s fear of the actual” (Rogers 227), but it seems that reality and actuality are inescapable. This is perhaps what Adam must face in order to reconcile himself with a reality that, despite his fear of it, is there and must be coped with. A work of art cannot escape the logic of the market, the reality of the world we live in.

Adam’s suggestion of covering the painting can be read as an artist’s response to the terrorist attacks. However, as Mariana Borges argues,

to regard a work of art as a ‘response’ to a historical event is, to some extent, the same as [to] consider literature an effect of history, because ‘response’ is only possible when there is a question from which the former depends and derives. If there is to be a

question, history is responsible for raising it, and literature for reacting to it, therefore, being determined by the very question. (7)

Hence, if literature is an effect of history, literature can also have an impact on history itself. Yet, Borges suggests that *Leaving the Atocha Station* is concerned with the fact that “there is no such thing as a necessary response” (8) and Adam and Lerner apparently agree with her. The episode of the covering of the painting seems to fail to respond to history. For Borges, the virtual idea Adam has in his mind is praiseworthy, but it fails to be actualized in the real world. Literature and art cannot “respond to traumatic moments, since trauma tends to be used as false evidence for certain political causes rather than literary purposes” (Borges 9). It can also be added that trauma can be exploited through art for monetary purposes, as Teresa worrying about the selling of the painting shows. However, it must be underlined that there aren’t only necessary responses, but possible responses as well. The retroactive appropriation of a gesture has nothing to do with the gesture’s true intention. Furthermore, as artists cannot control positive appropriations, they cannot control negative appropriations either – marketing purposes in this case.

The failure of art in describing and in influencing the world seems to be explored also in Ben Lerner’s poetry. But, what is explored exactly is a reaction to and a description of what happened. The fact is that this reaction comes some time later, at a distance, as often happens in literary history. For example, to recall just one of the many writers who wrote about World War I, Ernest Hemingway, we must remember that *A Farewell to Arms* came out only in 1929, eleven years after the end of the war. Writers need a certain temporal distance to write about what happened. If we consider Lerner’s poems, particularly a sonnet from *The Lichtenberg Figures* (2004), his first collection, and the longer prose poem “Didactic Elegy” which is part of *Angle of Yaw* (2006), we notice that his concern with terrorism and violence, connected to the role that poetry has in relation to politics, has interested him since the beginning of his

career. It must be remembered that this is not casual since author Ben Lerner has a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science. If Adam does not seem to have a specific stance about 9/11, Lerner indeed has one. As a matter of fact, it is the major terrorist attack Lerner often refers to in his poems, and this shows how the event had a profound impact on the memory of artists working immediately before and after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The attack was brutal, it killed almost three thousand people and injured at least six thousand. The collapse of the Twin Towers, despite not being the only event of the attack, is what people remember the most. It is interesting to compare how these poems deal with 9/11 in relation to how Adam Gordon and his Spanish friends react in the wake of 3/11, an attack which is closely connected to 9/11 because both were perpetrated by Al-Qaeda but mainly because 3/11 is the alleged result of 9/11 and everything that followed. For example, consider the following sonnet,

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.

(Lerner, *No Art: Poems*, 54)

At a first glance, this poem looks like a sonnet, but it shares with the sonnet just the number of lines and maybe a kind of *volta*, of a “turning point” which usually represents a thematic or a formal shift in the sonnet. In such a poem, thanks also to the *volta*, what is conveyed is a feeling of before and after. The “then” gives this impression of change, specifically regarding the public’s reception of an artist’s – the poet himself? – work, “I was praised for my use of repetition,” the speaker tells us. The event here, which caused the turning point, is the towers collapsing, and the towers are undeniably the Twin Towers that collapsed on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. In the second stanza, there is also a not-so-vague reference to the U.S. reaction to the attacks and to the American military invasion of Afghanistan. The “antimissile missiles” are kind of a paradox, since missiles are used to attack, but these ones, in particular, should be used to destroy other threatening missiles, in order to avoid tragedy. These missiles, instead, “tracked the night sky with ellipses,” and are directed towards a specific target. As Aron Rafael Chilewich argues in his dissertation *The Early Works of Ben Lerner*,

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. (14, emphasis mine)

Violence is a central theme in *The Lichtenberg Figures*. Lerner declared that “the kind of violence of the sonnet and the violence I did to the sonnet were supposed to be mimetic of the violence the poems were exploring in describing the country” (“Ben Lerner’s First Time”). Thus, the particular form of these poems is closely connected to the content and to what they are about. As a poet, Lerner thinks that form is “a form of content” (Rogers 236) and the violence the poem depicts is expressed also by the “violent” (mis)use of the sonnet scheme. So, we can compare this “visual elegy” of violence, which is definitely silent since perhaps it is witnessed from a radar, to the other visual moment of silence already encountered, the

covering of the painting from *Leaving the Atocha Station*. Furthermore, we can also consider the brutality of the third stanza of the sonnet altogether with the concern that *The Lichtenberg Figures* has with violence in general. Hence, we can conclude that “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” (Chilewich 14). The conclusion to this argument made by Chilewich is that, since the public is so used to every kind of violence in every aspect of everyday life, there is no adequate reaction to violence itself, because the reactions are not genuine but just “prefabricated experiences.” If the community reacts to such a terrible event with standardized expressions, then how can the artist react in a different way and be more genuine? This is not possible, according to Adam for example, because “poems aren’t *about* anything” as he tells Isabel (54) and they are definitely not machines that make things happen. After a traumatic event, there is a kind of disengagement; people feel sorry for what happened and act accordingly, but deep in their heart, if the traumatic event does not affect them directly, they feel distant from it. Being a witness and being a victim are two completely different things. That is what connotes Adam in the wake of 3/11. He is not Spanish, he is an American, so, from his perspective, what happens has nothing to do with him. He experiences the events as “meta-commentaries on the mediation of experience itself” and he is the embodiment of this being between a pre- and post-, of a periodization that was beginning to form, and that is a feeling exemplified also in the sonnet analyzed (Chilewich 17). The night after the bombing Adam is in the gallery, and he listens to the people around him, “talking about politics, [...] everything seemed suddenly political.” He continues,

I overheard conversations about the role of photography *now*, where “now” meant post-March 11. A “post” was being formed, and the air was alive less with the 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"; she said the phrase in English. (140)

The notion of periodization, the fact of having a "before" and an "after" when something tragic happens, is something that is needed in order to cope with a traumatic event. However, the fact that these attacks were "made for TV" entails a completely different purpose: one does not experience the event just one time, but re-views it and re-experiences it, "seemingly without end or purpose" (Chilewich 18). This repetition of the event is possible thanks to technology – such as that of the TV or of the cellphone – and it is something that Mariana Borges opposes to 'silence' in talking about how people react after a traumatic event happens. She argues that, after something terrible occurs, the reaction is either saying nothing about what has happened or otherwise continuously referring to the event: "the lack of concepts to apprehend the immaterial face of what had happened found its counterpart to constantly refer to the event" (2). The problem, though, is that if "it is difficult to differentiate between the collapse of the towers / and the image of the towers collapsing" and "The influence of images is often stronger than the influence of events," repeating things seems to empty them of meaning: "But as it is repeated, the power of the image diminishes, / producing anxiety and symbolic reinvestment" (Lerner, *Angle of Yaw* in *No Art*, 126). These lines, taken from Lerner's "Didactic Elegy," support the notion according to which repeating things empties them of meaning. Even Adam Gordon, when he tells everybody that his mother his dead or that his father is a fascist, repeats things and empties them out of meaning, "Instead of amplifying my guilt, repetition mitigated it" (61) and mitigated it because by telling continuously the same lie, then you do not start to notice that you're lying anymore, and it begins to not have a meaning, for you at least, any more. As Chilewich (28) notes, "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.” This brings one to react not to the event, but to “the event of the event’s image” (*No Art* 126) and thus, according to the speaker of “Didactic Elegy,” one does not analyze and interpret the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 themselves, but the depictions and representations of such events. Thus, “The American public reviews and reinterprets the violence of September 11<sup>th</sup> many orders of magnitude removed,” (Chilewich 28). It seems that Lerner is coherent in his oeuvre in showing the impact of traumatic events marked by violence. Since our experience of life is now more mediated than ever, we think that we experienced something firsthand, at the exact moment that it was happening, but, our experience of the event has been definitely mediated. However, what the speaker of “Didactic Elegy” wishes for is “a symbolic reinvestment” which, in some ways, can be read as a path to meaningfulness. In this sense, it is worth recalling the final lines of the poem: “The meaninglessness of the drawing is therefore meaningful / and the failure to seek out value is heroic. / Is this all that remains of poetry? / Ignorance that sees itself is elegy” (*No Art* 129).

To conclude, it seems that Lerner shares with Adam – and with Auden<sup>4</sup> – the ideas about the role of poetry in relation to the world and to politics. Adam writes,

I tried hard to imagine my poems or any poems as machines that could make things happen, changing the government or the economy or even their language, the body or its sensorium, but I could not imagine this, could not even imagine imagining it. And yet when I imagined the total victory of those other things over poetry, when I imagined, with a sinking feeling, a world without even the terrible excuses for poems that kept faith with the virtual possibilities of the medium, without the sort of absurd ritual I’d participated in that evening, then I intuited an inestimable loss, a loss not of artworks but of art, and therefore infinite, the total triumph of the actual, and I realized that, in such a world, I would swallow a bottle of white pills. (44-45)

---

<sup>4</sup> Auden writes in his poem “In Memory of WB Yeats,” “for poetry makes nothing happen” (*The Norton Anthology of Poetry* 1472).

Lerner explores this concept in the interview with Teddy Wayne, and he expands the argument saying that “even if the poem is doomed to stop short of achieving what it sets out to do, it can nevertheless gesture towards something beyond the tyranny of the real, our status quo. And I do consider this political, although not to be confused with direct political action” (n.p.). Thus, again, if the poem does not achieve something in the actual world, if it is not a “machine that makes things happen,” it can still inspire, somehow, the longing for the virtual, for something which goes beyond the actual, the real, and that is poetry’s power. In some ways, “poetry’s power derives from its powerlessness” (Interview with Teddy Wayne), even though “poems aren’t *about* anything” and “poetry makes nothing happen.” Adam thinks that poetry cannot intervene directly in the events, but he does think that there is still a relationship between art and politics. As Lerner says, Adam’s struggle “to figure out the possible political relevance of poetry” is “earnest” (Rogers 231) and “the virtual possibilities of the medium” he talks about in the excerpt above, stand “for alterity more generally – the power of artworks to allow us to experience a gap between the possible and the merely real” (Rogers 231). In talking about Adam’s approach to the relationship between poetry and politics, Lerner evokes the concept of “negative Romanticism” as elaborated by Robert Kaufman, according to whom “the aesthetic helps us exercise those critical faculties that are necessary to think beyond governing concepts” (Rogers 231). Again, the binary between the actual and the virtual enters the discourse, this time regarding the relationship between poetry and politics, and Adam finds himself, another time, in this position of liminality between two things. The book itself does not seem to resolve these issues raised by Adam – and by Lerner – but we must not dismiss Adam’s reflections on the relationship between art and politics. To cite again the big name that stands behind the novel, John Ashbery, “All poetry is against war and in favor of life, or else it isn’t poetry, and it stops being poetry when it is forced into the mold of a particular program. Poetry is poetry. Protest is protest. I believe in both forms of action” (qtd. in Longenbach 86-87).



## 2.4 (*Born*) *Between Mirrors*

Adam Gordon is concerned with the aesthetic preoccupation of not being able to grasp and render the virtuality of the actual work of art – whether this is a poem, a painting or some other form. This “bitter logic,” as Lerner declares in the interview with Rogers, becomes “Gordon’s *idée fixe*. It spreads out into all his relationships” (226) and becomes manifest, I would add, in the moment when Adam tries – or rather does not try - to establish a connection with other people in Spain who do not understand his language. He speaks with many other people in Spanish, but he is not confident at all in his knowledge of the language, as he repeats continuously during the book. This projection of aesthetic ideas into real life is “part of why he’s more moved by the spectacle of someone being moved by a work of art than by the actual work of art itself” (Rogers 226). Here the reference is to the already mentioned episode of the man crying in front of the Van der Weyden in the opening scene of the book. This identification of art and real life is also made explicit in the text with the insertion of a detail from the painting, the first embedded image that readers encounter in the text. It is a close-up of one of the mourners, a man crying in seeing Christ dying on the cross and this invites us to identify the image with the man crying in front of the painting, the man who Adam sees and follows through the museum and “into the preternaturally bright day” (10). Ashbery’s notion of “experience your experience” is here expressed: the man cries in front of a painting and in the painting, there is a man crying. Adam is the one who puts together this connection by including this detail of the man crying in the painting. Adam thinks that the man crying is a “great artist” (10) and then in the book we find the detail of the painting reported in black and white with the description “*I thought of the great artist for a while*” (11), making the identification direct and explicit. About the caption included in the book, Lerner said,

it’s a detail of the face of one of the weeping mourners, but in the context of the novel, I think it’s hard not to see it as an image of the museumgoer who bursts into tears before

that painting in front of the book's opening scene. So even that (black and white) reproduction is seen from the wrong side; the beheld becomes the beholder. (Rogers 227-228)

Thus, another example of the mirroring of experience already examined in talking about John Ashbery is here reported in the book. The personal sphere is reflected in the artistic, but it must be said that it is dangerous to apply aesthetic categories to the social sphere, and the example of Adam's relationships with other people, especially Teresa and Isabel, with the Spanish language and with Spain as a country, show us that this can result in a failure. As the book progresses, we find Adam repeatedly suffering through situations of displacement and dislocation. I will read these incidents of dislocation beginning from this tension between the actual and the virtual which derives from his aesthetic preoccupations about art in general and poetry in particular.

One of the first things that one notices about Adam is that he struggles with the Spanish language, suffering from something which Dyer defines as "linguistic dislocation" (n.p.). How Adam experiences his year abroad in Spain is, to come back to the terms used by Caracciolo in *The Experientiality of Narrative*, through situations of failing consciousness-attribution and of the consequent absence of consciousness-enactment. His own story-driven experience and the experience that he attributes to other characters do not intersect. He is always tentative in his relationships with other people, for example, and that happens also on a linguistic level, reflected in how he relates with both Isabel and Teresa. Adam does not even try to attribute them a consciousness and consequently he fails to empathize with them and to feel closer to them, because he does not even seem interested in doing so. Of course, other people also fail to identify and understand Adam. To the other characters in the novel, he appears as slippery, in the sense that they cannot *attribute* him a consciousness, let alone *enact* his consciousness, or at least that is what emerges from what he says. From the outset, Adam describes his experience with the foreign language. He says, "[f]ew words were addressed to me [...]. I

almost never spoke, although I tried to smile, and to imply with my smile that I understood what was being said to me” (12). He tries to communicate with other people with his facial expressions rather than with a language he thinks he does not know. This conduct will put him in awkward situations: for example, he will be punched in the face a few lines later because he was smiling while Isabel was relating a sad story. He tries to make up for his behavior by saying, “I decided to attempt speech: I didn’t understand, I tried to say, or I didn’t listen, but whatever I stammered was unintelligible, barely Spanish” (12). First, he says that he did not understand but then admits that perhaps he was not listening at all. So, here we can see how this notion of “linguistic dislocation” is present, but perhaps it does not have the importance one might think it has. Adam is hiding behind his poor knowledge of the Spanish language to try to make amends for something unpleasant he has done, like smiling while a person was telling a sad story. Adam uses this certainty of not being fluent in Spanish to hide some awful things he says throughout the whole novel. For example, he also tells Teresa, during the first evening they meet, that his mother died, just to impress her (29). This brings Adam to think about the fact that what he has said could make things happen, that language can influence the real world,

I began to imagine my mom, how she would feel if she knew what I had done, my self-disgust giving way in turn to the fear that somehow this lie would have material effects, would kill her, or at least that, when something did happen in fact to my mother, as happen it must, I would always feel and be at least in part responsible, that whatever she suffered would be traceable in some important sense to this exact moment when I traded her life for the sympathy of an attractive stranger. (29)

After that, Adam discovers that Teresa’s father died for real, and she tells him a sad story about her dad, and from here he discovers that Teresa has been to the U.S. and speaks fluent English. After that episode, he does not even seem sad for what he has done, only worried that something could happen to his mother. Adam’s fear of what can happen, of the actual, is here expressed.

He does seem to be scared of the actual and is always interested much more – both on a personal and on an aesthetic level – in the virtual, in the possibility of what could happen and not in what really happens.

Significantly, Adam uses the fact that he does not speak Spanish fluently as an excuse whenever it suits him to do so, and he does that willfully. It is not that he does not speak or understand the language, on the contrary, many people tell him that he is indeed fluent. Adam speaks of understanding Spanish “in chords,” meaning that he understands what people are saying “in a plurality of words,” (14) thus he is always guessing what a person is saying, contemplating different possible scenarios. This possibility of the language, which is similar to the possibility of interpreting and creating a work of art, is explicated in the relationships he has with Teresa and Isabel. Adam fears becoming fluent, perhaps because, as Paul Theroux puts it, “[w]hen the expatriate feels he knows the country in which he is working, he loses interest” (qtd. in Irr 667). We can expand this argument by saying that Adam, as an expatriate, not only is afraid of losing interest but mostly of losing his appeal of being interesting. This happens in the realm of possibility, of the virtual. He is the only person in the novel who continuously repeats how his Spanish is bad. He develops relationships with Spanish people, and he asks Teresa, who knows English, to speak Spanish with him. Both Isabel and Teresa become frustrated by the fact that Adam continuously repeats that he is not fluent in Spanish. If he attains fluency, it would be a problem for him: with fluency, he would lose his profoundness, as he says, and this would ruin his relationships. He expresses this preoccupation in two passages, one regarding Isabel and one about Teresa. About his relationship with Isabel, he says,

[...] my Spanish was getting better, despite myself, and I experienced, with the force of revelation, an obvious realization: our relationship largely depended upon my never becoming fluent, on my having an excuse to speak in enigmatic fragments or koans, and while I had no fear of mastering Spanish, I wondered, [...] how long I could remain

in Madrid without crossing whatever invisible threshold of proficiency would render me devoid of interest. (51)

He expresses a similar concern about Teresa, stressing the importance of the difference of the relationships he has with the two women: Isabel does not speak English, Teresa does. Consider this passage,

I never spoke English with Teresa [...] I told her that this was to promote my acquisition of Spanish, but it was, in fact, to preserve the possibility of misspeaking or being misunderstood, and to secure and amplify the mystery of that inaugural outburst. [...] I hoped she would always translate my fragmented Spanish in her head, transforming my halting and semicoherent utterances into the most eloquent English she could imagine. (83)

It is important to stress the fact that Teresa becomes Adam's translator from English into Spanish, but here what Adam is imagining is in reverse: she would translate his spoken Spanish into wonderful English, and not his written English into Spanish. Adam thinks that what makes him more attractive to Isabel, according to what he declares, concerns the pauses, the silences of his speech which give depth and solemnity to what he is saying. On the other hand, what makes him desirable to Teresa is the fact that she would transform his bad Spanish into "the most eloquent English she could imagine." That is the difference between the two, and this is how Adam sees them. It is interesting to notice how Adam feels about both, and how his relationships with them are based on language, a language in which he is fluent, though it is a fluency he does not want to recognize.

Other than being distanced from the language, Adam also disengages himself from Spain as a nation. Adam voluntarily detaches himself from the political events which surround him after March 11<sup>th</sup>. Instead of participating in the protests on the streets and see "History being made," he decides to go home and read the news in his language on the website of the *The New York Times*. Rather than going to see what is happening just outside his window,

Adam explains that, “I [...] walked Huertas to my apartment. I climbed the stairs and took off my jacket and turned on my computer. [...] I opened a browser, called up the *New York Times*, and clicked on the giant headline. The article described the helicopters I could hear above me” (118). It is as if he is voluntarily detaching himself from a history he feels he does not belong to. Retrospectively, we can argue that he needs that specific distance to deal with what had just happened. Unlike Teresa or Arturo, he is not Spanish, he is an American, and he prefers to read about the helicopters he can hear above him in an American newspaper website instead of witnessing the events with his eyes. His refusal to admit his fluency in Spanish is influenced perhaps by the fact that he wants to distance himself from the bombing and the consequent protests. If he becomes involved with the protests, if he accepts that he is fluent in a foreign language and admits that he could “live in this language,” as Teresa tells him (168), he can recognize, too, that he is a real poet and not a fraud as he thinks he is. On the other hand, if he realizes that he is fluent in Spanish, and therefore not so detached from the events which affect the country he is living in, his going back to America becomes less possible, and that is what seems to scare him. Since the beginning, we know that his time in Spain is limited: he is an expat, but only for a limited period. He connects his staying successfully in Spain to his being a good poet, thus deserving the fellowship that sent him there. America, instead, is identified with another reality, as opposed to the reality of Spain. As we have seen, his sense of the “real,” or the actual, as opposed to the virtual, to the realm of possibility, is expressed from the very first pages regarding the meaning and the importance of a work of art or a poem. America means finding a real job, going to law school or applying for a Ph.D.; it becomes, thus, a synonym of renouncing poetry. Staying in Spain after the fellowship would be only “postponing the inevitable” (163). Hence, the title of the book, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, taken from one of John Ashbery’s poems, evokes perhaps this idea of turning away from the events. He is *leaving* the reality of Spain and the actual Atocha Station where the bombings

occurred to come back to the virtuality of America; an America which is *virtual* because he still does not know what is going to happen to him when he will go back to the U.S. This notion of what is real and what is virtual is expressed by his considerations about currency, too: Adam repeatedly says that, in his eyes, euros look like fake money, as opposed to dollars. When he is in Barcelona, wandering around the streets, he calls them “unreal currency” (154), a phrase which evokes T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” in which London is an “unreal city.” Nonetheless, it is not that Adam sees his period in Europe as temporary and virtual, as opposed to the more permanent and more real life in America. Rather he sees himself as being between two different realities, he is in this gap, and it seems that he must either make an unwanted choice or accept this situation, as he will do in the end. The novel’s title, and the homonymous poem describe an action which is happening, in the present continuous, thus underlining this notion of being on the threshold.

The linguistic dislocation and the political disengagement are also reflected in a personal dissociation. Throughout the novel, Adam seems to fail to occupy his deictic center, the position that naturally belongs to him. In a sense, it is as if Adam’s own consciousness enactment fails, and that is what causes him to see himself as if from another perspective. If in consciousness-enactment “there is an overlap between the reader’s [or viewer’s] real body and the fictional body of the character” (Caracciolo 132), what is happening here instead is the opposite. Adam’s consciousness enactment fails in the sense that he cannot even identify with himself, and he suffers from this doubling, this seeing himself from another perspective, of not being entirely conscious of his position in the world. Adam repeatedly says that he can see himself as if from above or from another point of view, not being conscious of being himself. For example, when he is at Rufina’s with Isabel, he says, “I saw myself as if from the yard, amazed” (63). This effect is provoked by the antidepressants and by the drugs that he smokes, and the feeling becomes more intense when he increases the dosage of his pills. Thanks to this

more acute dislocation and disengagement, though, he can write more. Adam says that “it was as if I were suspended in a warm bath outside of myself” (104). It is at this point that Adam sees himself, as he says, for the first time “as a writer” (104). It is this distance, this detachment from everything, rendered more intense by the new dosage of the pills, which makes him sharper and allows him to write poetry. But the most powerful description of this state of disengagement emerges a little earlier in the book. When he is at his first reading in Madrid, hearing Arturo reading his poems in Spanish, he says, “I was both in that room and outside of it [...], It was like seeing myself looking down at myself looking up” (41). Compare this to another passage earlier in the novel, the passage that inspired the poem that Arturo is reading in translation. Sitting on the roof of his apartment, Adam is looking up at the airplanes above his head and says, “I imagined the passengers could see me, imagined I was a passenger that could see me looking up at myself looking down” (21). Those are the same last lines of the poem Adam reads, “I imagine the passengers / Could see me, imagined I was / A passenger that could see me / Looking up...” (40). These two passages, from page 41 and page 21, mirror each other: the latter finds Adam “looking up at myself looking down,” while the former tells us that it is as if “seeing myself looking down at myself looking up.” The structure of these two phrases evokes the concept of mirroring. It is impossible not to draw a connection between the two passages and not notice the idea of being “born between mirrors” (181). The expression comes from Federico Garcia Lorca’s “Canción del naranjo seco” and if we take a look at the line in the original, we notice even more this notion of the mirrors. The line in the original Spanish is “¿Por qué nací entre espejos?” (Lorca 104) and here it can be noticed that thanks to the rules of the Spanish language, the punctuation helps to reinforce the notion of mirroring. Thus, it is as if the form, how the line is written, reflects the content of the line, what these words are about. Adam is indeed between mirrors here, in this condition of liminality, a condition exposed also by his juggling between two languages. Adam hears from his roof,



“several languages, American or Australian English to me the most grating” (21). The extract from page 41 is connected instead to Spanish, to Arturo reading his poems in that foreign language, and to the first, brief realization that he could hear his poetic voice behind those words. In this way, he notices that maybe his Spanish was not that bad, and probably he has a distinctive voice indeed, the voice of a poet. In the lines quoted from page 21, we notice the repetition of the word “passenger,” singular and plural, a word with which Adam identifies himself, a reference to the movie *The Passenger* by Michelangelo Antonioni, of which a cropped still can be found in the book on page 173. Hence, it can be argued that Adam is just a passenger in Spain: his time spent there and his effort to learn Spanish and become fluent in that language has become “a last or nearly last hurrah of juvenility, but it would not in any serious sense, form part of my life” (170). We know that this is not true because, in the end, his Spanish will get better, it is just that he does not seem to accept it yet. The disengagement with the Spanish language and Spain comes at its strongest when he gets lost in Barcelona, where he declares himself “a real American,” because he is incapable of “fetching coffee in this country” and “understanding its Civil War. I hadn’t even seen the Alhambra” (158). It is an instant of realization that comes in a moment of distress, in which he is struggling to find his way back to the hotel, to Teresa and thus, to Spain and the Spanish language, symbols of the coming awareness that he will approach by the end of the novel.

Adam asks himself why he is “born between mirrors” (181) on the very last page of the novel. Which mirrors is he talking about? Perhaps, these mirrors are the mirrors of the virtual and the real, of poetry and politics – politics intended as to what happens in the real world. Adam is both an American and an expatriate; he is between fiction – he is a fictional character – and reality (Lerner is the writer of Adam's poems, which are published under his name, plus the bombing of March 11<sup>th</sup> was real). He is also between languages, between a Spanish he does not want to recognize he has mastered and English, which is his mother tongue. However, it is

not a dichotomy; it is more specifically a kind of trichotomy. He is in the realm of the virtual, between two mirrors which reflect two realities, that of Spain and that of America. He reflects himself in these mirrors: the way he reads a poem or perceives a work of art shows this situation of being on the threshold, and how he experiences the Spanish language reflects this. In the novel, Adam is obsessed with having a *profound experience of art* (8), an experience that he is not able to have. To this end, he proposes a distinct experience. He is “obsessed with this binary of the virtual and the actual [...]. He is interested in the *gap* between actual artworks and the claims made on their behalf and finds art and poetry most beautiful when encountered in a virtual form” as author Ben Lerner states in an interview with *BOMB Magazine*, also quoting from the novel (emphasis mine, 9). Thus, the *possibility* of what language or poetry could communicate, the virtual space, is what is more important to Adam, what Grossman called “the echo of poetic possibility” (9), a practice that his way of reasoning about Spanish echoes, too.

Adam is between mirrors, in the sense that he is between realities, realities to which he does not entirely belong, being an expatriate. Adam is between languages, between cultures, and between personalities. He is not “born” an expatriate, however, he becomes one the moment he enters a foreign country, and in this sense, this birth can be read as a symbolic (re)birth. In the end, Adam seems to accept his condition of in-betweenness. He acknowledges that he is fluent in Spanish, that he is a poet and that he is not a fraud. However, what he produces from this experience is not what he intended to. Instead of writing an epic poem about the Spanish Civil War, he writes a novel. It is not clear if he remained in Spain, or went back to America, but the important thing is that he accepts his condition and writes a hybrid novel. Not having a resolution is, in itself, a solution, and that is Adam’s stance at the end of the novel. In the end, it is as if he accepts his condition of failure connected both to the failure of his aesthetic principles – of the failure of poetry to mediate between the actual and the virtual – and to the failure associated with how he relates with the people he meets and to the places he

goes. It is in this position of threshold that he ultimately feels himself at ease. From this position of liminality, in what Marianne Moore has called “a place for the genuine” in her “Poetry,” (*The Norton Anthology of Poetry* 1329) Adam is able to produce a work of art which is not what he expected, but that has more of the virtual than of the actual in it, since its form is not so definite and has no specific shape but is nonetheless more powerful exactly because of that.

### 3. Different Futures

During the very first scene of Ben Lerner's second novel, *10:04* (2014), the narrator, a writer, is asked by his agent how exactly he will expand a story he published in *The New Yorker* which could get him a "strong six-figure" if he turned it into a novel. The narrator answers, not to the agent, but to himself, "I'll project myself into several futures simultaneously" [...] "I'll work my way from irony to sincerity in the sinking city, a would-be Whitman of the vulnerable grid" (Lerner, *10:04*, 4)<sup>5</sup>. Maggie Nelson has argued that these lines contain, in a nutshell, the 'plot' of the novel – if we consider the novel to *have* a real plot – and I agree with her. The narrator is not only providing the plot, he is also revealing some of the themes he will explore in the book.

The projection "into several futures simultaneously" recalls a figure that has a certain relevance and recurs in the book, that of the octopus, with its alien-like shape and its multiple limbs, able to "taste what it touches" (6), even more things simultaneously, but unable to feel and perceive its specific place in the world because it lacks what is called "proprioception." The narrator is constantly compared to the octopus; the first section of this chapter will show how and why this comparison is relevant. The octopus is also related to another important figure of the book, the American poet Walt Whitman, who assumes the same role that John Ashbery had in *Leaving the Atocha Station*. Whitman, too, is mentioned in the lines above and can be compared to the octopus because, like this animal, he goes beyond his individual body towards the communal, extending his "limbs" to the multitude. The narrator is connected to both the octopus and Whitman because he identifies with the octopus, he feels that his limbs are multiplied and elongated, but he also wants to be Whitman. It is thanks to Whitman himself that the narrator learns to perform this move from irony to sincerity because Whitman teaches

---

<sup>5</sup> From now on, when not specified, page number(s) will refer to *10:04*.

him how to embrace collective values and be enthusiast about the future. Although while we read the novel we have a sense of being in the present, we must remember that *10:04* is, like *Leaving the Atocha Station*, a retrospective account. Even though the narrator talks about the process of writing, he is creating an illusion of simultaneity. The narrator, having learned Whitman's lesson and conscious of the techniques of fiction writing, embarks on a moral and political journey which allows him to describe what is like to live in the present continuous of "a sinking city," that is New York, but stands for the contemporary metropolis in which capitalism is most alive, in a period characterized by the impact of mankind on Planet Earth that marks the era some geologists call the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is a period of time which concerns also "the vulnerable grid" of the market and of capitals, that network of connections that constitute the world we live in now and that Lerner, with *10:04* and his narrator, tries to describe and to face. As Drew Nelles writes in *The Globe and the Mail*, "To the extent that *10:04* is 'about' anything, it is about the tensions between, and possibilities of, these different worlds and different futures" (n.p.).

### **3.1 Interested in the Octopuses<sup>6</sup>**

In the opening scene of *10:04*, the first-person narrator describes a scene in which he is walking with his agent after a meal he had with her,

The city had converted an elevated length of abandoned railway spur into an aerial greenway and the agent and I were walking south along it in the unseasonable warmth after an outrageously expensive celebratory meal in Chelsea that included baby octopuses the chef had literally massaged to death. (3)

As in *Leaving the Atocha Station*, we have a first-person narrator who may or may not be a writer – we will discover in a moment that he is indeed one – since he is having dinner with his agent. The city is definitely New York because specific places are mentioned, like the

---

<sup>6</sup> The title is taken from Gabriel Roth's article on *10:04* published on *Slate*.

neighborhood of Chelsea and Tenth Avenue. The narrator and his agent are celebrating something, eating exotic food, so something good must have happened. Some themes of the novel are here introduced, for example, there is the city, in which the narrator lives and wanders, often with his best friend Alex, a city presented immediately as being in the process of transforming itself (“the railway is turned into an aerial greenway”). Also, we have the first recording of the “unseasonable warmth” that will recur in the rest of the book, suggesting the underlying theme of global warming and climate change. Then, we have a most striking and particular image, that of the baby octopuses massaged to death. From now on, this eight-armed animal will be used by the narrator as a metaphor for his feelings and sensations, especially about the physical and psychological space that he occupies in the world of the novel. Ingesting the octopuses is a weird experience, “We had ingested the impossibly tender things entire, the first intact head I had ever consumed, let alone of an animal that decorates its lair, has been observed at complicated play” (3), and the fact that it has been shown that the octopus “decorates its lair” in a sense makes the narrator feel guilty for eating what it is a very intelligent animal. As a matter of fact, as Silvia Killingsworth in *The New Yorker* notices, the narrator, while walking with his agent after the meal, “experiences an empathic response to the once sentient octopuses now curdling within him” (n.p.). Eating the octopus transforms him into one,

We sat and watched the traffic and I am kidding and I am not kidding when I say that I intuited an alien intelligence, felt subject to a succession of images, sensations, memories, and affects that did not, properly speaking, belong to me: the ability to perceive polarized light; a conflation of taste and touch as salt was rubbed into the suction cups; a terror localized in my extremities, bypassing the brain completely. (3)

He intuits an alien intelligence, both for the alien-like shape of the octopuses themselves and because his body perceives them as alien since he had never eaten them before. Plus, he feels “images, sensations, memories and affects” that are not his; in a sense, these sensations belong

to the octopus: octopuses perceive polarized lights, octopuses have suction cups, octopuses “taste as they touch” and octopuses have extremities. These impressions he has are connected to the fact that, as we discover a few lines later, he could have a syndrome known as Marfan, “a genetic disorder of the connective tissue that typically produces the long-limbed and flexible” (4) and this connection is made explicit by the fact that while he is in the room during his medical evaluation, he notices a painting of a giant octopus on the wall. Besides, while the doctors are examining him, he says, “I felt as if my limbs had multiplied” (6). The narrator links all these references to octopuses in the notion of “proprioception,” a concept that is deeply connected with this cephalopod. He writes, without specifying what the “it” refers to,

It can taste what it touches, but has poor proprioception, the brain unable to determine the position of its body in the current, particularly my arms, and the privileging of flexibility over proprioceptive inputs means it lacks stereognosis, the capacity to form a mental image of the overall shape of what I touch. (6)

The passage begins referring to an unspecified “it,” but then the pronouns are switched to the first person and back, thus showing a movement of identification that happens between the narrator and the octopus, which is undeniably what the “it” refers to. “Proprioception” is defined as the “sense or relative position of one’s own parts of the body and strength of effort being employed in the movement” (n.p.). Lacking proprioception then means not being conscious of one’s own position in space. Despite the octopus having evenly distributed neurons, meaning “it can taste what it touches,” it does not exactly know what its position in space is. Emily Witt argues that the notion of proprioception as applied to the narrator becomes “a refrain about the poor perceptual relationships of the individual to the social body” (n.p.); both the octopus and the narrator “can detect local texture variations, but cannot integrate that information into a larger picture, cannot read the realistic fiction the world appears to be” (6-7). In a sense, the narrator approaches all the themes he talks about in the novel such as “global trade, social inequality, ecological catastrophe, the limitations of a human’s reproductive

lifespan, and the passage and accumulation of time,” difficult issues that he describes in detail, by showing the “local texture variations” of his life in New York and Marfa between hurricanes Irene and Sandy (Witt n.p.). For Anthony Domestico, the notion of proprioception “stands as a figure for the many ways in which the narrator tries to understand himself as occupying a particular place and time within the broader structures of geographical and temporal experience,” failing at first to encompass them all. Domestico goes on to say that the narrator prefers

flexibility over proprioceptive inputs, [...] sensation over structure, self over the systems that shape the self. But his looming death—the possible extinction of the self—helps him to realize this fact and, for the rest of the novel, he tries to more accurately and consistently see himself as relationally constituted. (n.p.)

Something must be noted here. The first scene, the opening scene of the book in which the narrator eats the baby octopuses, occurs months later than the scene at the doctor, where he was sent “the previous September” (4). So, it can be argued that, even though in the book these two scenes are linked, we can notice that they are connected using the artifice of writing: eating the octopus sparks in the narrator a recollection of the moment when he went to the doctor to see if he had Marfan, and this is how the book begins. Despite the feeling of immediacy that the novel provides, it must be remembered that, as with *Leaving the Atocha Station*, the book we are reading is a retrospective account which talks also about the way this work of fiction came to be. Lerner will arrive at the scene of the dinner, describing it with more detail towards the end of Part 3, a scene that is set just before he leaves for Marfa, if one wants to try to reconstruct the book’s timeline.

It is during his residency in Marfa that the figure of the octopus returns, as connected to something which is “an alien intelligence” (3), especially when the narrator talks about the Marfa Lights. Part 4 describes the narrator’s residency in Marfa, Texas, where he goes for five weeks to focus on writing his novel about forgery, and how to expand the story he published



in *The New Yorker*. During the residency, he talks about one of the things Marfa is famous for, namely the Marfa Lights,

What people report, have reported for at least a hundred years, are brightly glowing spheres, the size of a basketball, that float above the ground, or sometimes high in the air. They are usually white, yellow, orange, or red, but some people have seen green and blue. They hover around shoulder-height, or move laterally at low speeds, or sometimes break suddenly in unpredictable directions. People have ascribed the Marfa Lights to ghosts, UFOs, or ignis fatuus, [...]. (192)

The narrator is suggesting here that many people believe these spheres of light belong to the realm of the supernatural, or to something which is “alien” in the sense that they come from another world. However, he adds, “researchers have suggested they are most likely the result of atmospheric reflections of automobile headlights and campfires; apparently sharp temperature gradients between cold and warm layers of air can produce those effects” (192). So, the Marfa Lights are not UFOs or ghosts after all, but it is interesting that the narrator may have a possible condition named “Marfan” that makes him feel like an octopus. Plus, this particular animal evokes how we often picture aliens, as many science fiction books and movies have shown – the latest that comes to mind is *Arrival* (2016) where aliens are called “heptapods” – and he is in a place called Marfa, TX, watching these lights that some people think are UFOs. Moreover, as Lerner himself remarks in the 2014 interview with Tao Lin in *The Believer*, “Marfan” is a word that recalls “martian” (n.p.). Everything seems to be connected then: the narrator, the octopus, Marfa and its lights, and everything seems to evoke a world that goes beyond ours – is this perhaps “the world to come” the book constantly talks about? In the last section of Part 4 of *10:04*, the narrator uses a vocabulary that refers to the supernatural to describe what he sees while trying to look for the spheres in Marfa. The lights are “ghost lights” and the person he is with, the Polish poet and translator that he calls “Creeley,” is a “phantom” (192). The narrator calls the Polish poet “Creeley” because he is

living in the house where the poet Robert Creeley lived during his own residency in Marfa, and where Creeley “began to die” (165) in 2005. Creeley and the Polish poet continuously overlap in the narrator’s mind, but this entity that they create is never fully formed, it seems a ghost-like presence,

When I was about to go back in, having stood and opened the screen door, I heard the creak and bang of the screen door on the porch across from mine, the noise setting off a chain reaction of barking dogs. I hesitated; having hesitated, and knowing I’d been seen, even in the dark, I felt a pressure to turn around and signal some kind of greeting to the other nocturnal resident, who hadn’t put his porch light on. I did turn, plate and silverware in one hand, and saw the cupped flame as he lit his cigarette, thought I could make out a beard and glasses. I stood there awkwardly for a moment and then he raised his arm and I raised mine, feeling as I went back in, and feeling ridiculous for feeling it, that I’d just waved to Creeley. (167)

The narrator, as Lerner suggests, is afraid that Marfan is going to kill him and he is in Marfa, where a poet he admires, Robert Creeley, began to die (Interview with Tao Lin 2014). While he is at the viewing center with the Polish poet himself, the narrator notices that he saw no spheres, “but I loved the idea of them – the idea that our worldly light could be reflected back to us and mistaken as supernatural” (193). So, the reality we live in is *mistaken* as supernatural. There is no ghost of Creeley, there are not UFOs or aliens, there is just the world we live in. However, “supernatural” may refer to “the world to come,” in the sense that what we expect is still here, what we define as “alien,” the other, is simply the collective (Interview with Tao Lin 2014). About the Marfa Lights, Lerner added also that the narrator is “having a kind of Feuerbach moment there—admiring the lights as a fiction, the way Feuerbach reinterpreted God as a projection of the essence of our species. So, the other is alien in the sense that it’s the form of our collective alienation” (Interview with Tao Lin 2014 n.p.).

The problems of “alienation” and “residency” refer also to another issue that Lerner tackles in the book, the notion of the citizenship status of immigrants, as related also to the

exploitation of labor. The narrator connects, or at least tries to, with the immigrants he mentions in the novel, and this makes him observe that all the people who are doing humbler jobs are, in fact, Hispanic, as he notices when he is at a restaurant with the agent, “Swift, Spanish-speaking laborers took away the plates” (157). This is explored twice in the narration: first, with the recurring figure of Roberto, an immigrant child the narrator tutors and then with the Mexican laborers who are fixing the roof of his house in Marfa. He connects with Roberto, for example, by tutoring him and reassuring him about his fears. Roberto’s fears are expressed in a dream he tells the narrator,

What happens in my bad dream is the buildings all freeze up after global warming makes an ice age and the prisons crack open too and then all the killers get out through the cracks and come after us and Joseph Kony comes after us and we have to escape to San Salvador but they have helicopters and night vision and anyway we don’t have *papeles* so we can’t get anywhere. (13)

Global warming, Joseph Kony, and criminals, in general, are among Roberto’s fears, but what emerges from this passage is his brutal honesty in describing what it means for an undocumented child to live in the United States, fearing that he will get stuck because he does not have *papeles*, something which precludes him from leaving and to escape from Joseph Kony, who he, at that moment, sees as the embodiment of evil. Roberto is “alien” in the country he lives in, and the alienation Roberto conveys in this dream is reflected in the response of the narrator to the child’s dream. Before reassuring the child, he says,

An increasingly frequent vertiginous sensation like a transient but thorough agnosia in which the object in my hand, this time a green pair of safety scissors, ceases to be a familiar tool and becomes an alien artifact, thereby estranging the hand itself, a condition brought on by the intuition of spatial and temporal collapse or, paradoxically, an overwhelming sense of its sudden integration, as when a Ugandan warlord appears via YouTube in an undocumented Salvadorean child’s Brooklyn-based dream of a future wrecked by dramatically changing weather patterns and an imperial juridical

system that dooms him to statelessness; Roberto, like me, tended to figure the global apocalyptically. (13-14)

The scissors the narrator is holding become something “alien,” and we know from reading the book that Roberto’s fears are not dissimilar to those of the narrator: global warming and changing weather patterns are also among his concerns, as is the issue of immigration, even if it does not involve him directly. The connection is made explicit in the last line, “Roberto, like me, tended to figure out the global apocalyptically.” Through Roberto, the narrator is able to face problems he otherwise would not be able to face, because his position of privilege puts him in a particular situation when talking about a specific problem, like that of immigration. The other immigrants the narrator encounters in the book are the ones who fix his roof in Marfa. The narrator tries to connect with them, “I made eye contact with one of the young Mexican men laboring there” and he also tells them if they wanted “coffee, water or whatever” but then he “somnambulated on” back inside the house (172). The narrator then wonders, “Did the workers themselves have legal residency here, in what was for them the north, for me the extreme south?” (172). The distance between the narrator and the workers is here explicitly addressed. He can stay there at the residency because he applied for it and was accepted, but he wonders whether the workers have “legal residency,” something which for them changes everything. The chasm is even bigger if we consider that the narrator’s residency is not only legal but is a form of paid stay, while for the Mexican workers the term stands for the place of official habitation. That the workers are in the United States, what is for them the North, illegally is never specified but just assumed by the narrator. The distance becomes clearer when he is wondering what they think of him and of the other residents of the foundation. This will be explored in the following chapter, in which I will show the influence of Whitman on the novel. For the time being, it is important to notice only how this intersection of “residency” and “alien” allows Lerner to explore delicate themes such as immigration.

The “collective alienation” which makes the “other,” what we cannot explain, “alien” – like for example the Marfa Lights – forces us to mistake the transpersonal for the supernatural, without noticing that actually, “the transpersonal is more awe-inspiring, more exciting than the thing we confuse it for” (Lerner to Tao Lin 2014 n.p.). The term “transpersonal” refers to something that goes beyond “the personal level of the psyche, and beyond mundane worldly events.” Transpersonal experiences are those “in which the sense of identity or self extends beyond (*trans*) the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, psyche or cosmos” (Walsh & Vaughan n.p.). In the context of *10:04*, the transpersonal cannot be seen as something that goes vertically towards what is beyond humanity, something which is more similar to the supernatural, but as something that works horizontally and that overcomes individuality in order to reach a specific collectivity and connection between the people on the planet, here and now. When the narrator, for example, is cooking dinner for the Occupy protester, he ruminates about the fact that perhaps he wants a child, but then he immediately changes his mind, only to conclude that

What you need to do is harness the self-love you are hypostasizing as offspring, as the next generation of you, and let it branch out horizontally into the possibility of a transpersonal revolutionary subject in the present and coconstruct a world in which moments can be something other than the elements of profit. (47)

As Maggie Nelson argues, even if the

narrator offers no answers, [...] in the book’s final pages, he gives a virtuosic performance of what such blurring might feel like: past, present, and future tenses merge; the tight trio of the narrator, Alex, and developing fetus zooms in and out of focus, set against a metropolis teeming with other lives; the narrator’s first-person narration expands out to address the reader directly (“maybe you saw me”), and eventually encompasses the words of Whitman, testifying to a nearly incredible empathy with the multitudinous. (n.p.)

Thus, the “transpersonal revolutionary subject” seems to be the narrator of the novel itself, someone who can “coconstruct” moments outside the logic of profit and *with* other people. That is exactly what he does. In the first section of the book this “coconstruction” happens with three different people: first with Alex, when they “coconstruct the literal view before us” (8) while they are at the museum watching paintings, having a shared experience of art, as we might say; then with Roberto with whom he coconstructs “ a shoe-box diorama to accompany the book Roberto and I planned to self-publish” (11) and ultimately when he imagines to coconstruct a spacecraft with his childhood friend Daniel (15). Nevertheless, the term “coconstruct” disappears from the novel – except for a brief re-appearance in the scene of the Occupy protester – after the first storm fails to come. From this perspective, the identification between the narrator and the octopus assumes another meaning,

When the narrator feels like an octopus, when he says his limbs are starting to multiply, he means he has inklings of orders of perception beyond his individual body. The personal starts to dissolve, get emptied out. You’re right to link it to the epigraph because it’s a way of saying: there’s a sense in which community is already here. It’s already here in the Marfa lights and the circuits of global capital (that moves a baby octopus from Portuguese waters to a Chelsea restaurant) and even if those are deeply perverted forms of interconnectedness they nevertheless have a utopian glimmer. (Interview with Tao Lin 2014 n.p.)

In a manner, the world to come is already here. After all, in the world to come “everything will be as it is now, just a little different,” as the epigraph suggests. However, until we start to become aware of it, is hidden from us. Therefore, the role of the artist is to make us notice this “alternative” world, to provide “bad forms of collectivity that can serve as figures of its real possibility” (116), to quote the speech the narrator gives at the Columbia School of Arts. In this view, the lesson of Whitman is very precious for the narrator. Lerner connects the figure of Whitman to that of the octopus, in the sense that, despite there being many problems in Whitman’s bid for universality, the “(not just) Whitmanic fantasy that you can dissolve

yourself through art into collective possibility” remains a dream that is alive for the historical author Ben Lerner, even though he cannot defend it (Interview with Tao Lin 2014). The next section will explore Whitman’s profound influence on the narrator of *10:04* and on the book more in general.

### ***3.2 Every atom belonging to me as goods belongs to you***

From the very beginning, the narrator of *10:04* evokes the name of Walt Whitman, a poet who lies behind the book in the same manner that poet John Ashbery influenced the writing of Lerner’s first book, *Leaving the Atocha Station*. The poet is first mentioned at the end of the first scene. When the narrator is asked how he will expand his short story that will become the novel we are reading, he says that he wants to be “a would-be Whitman of the vulnerable grid” (4). Thus, the narrator identifies himself with Whitman, but at first his stance toward Whitman is ambivalent. As a matter of fact, the book begins with this scene but then we have a flashback to the previous September and from then on, the book develops more or less chronologically. However, the narrator returns to the dinner scene at the end of Part 3, but does not mention Whitman because he still has to “meet” him properly, something that will happen in Part 4, which describes the narrator’s residency in Marfa, Texas. He introduces Whitman at the beginning in order to make the readers notice what to expect from what follows and to emphasize that this is indeed a retrospective account, something that allows the narrator to use analepsis and prolepsis. Furthermore, the phrase in which he expresses his desire to be Whitman is only said to himself and not to the agent with whom he is talking in the first scene. In Marfa, Whitman, together with another poet, Robert Creeley, is a vivid presence in the narrator’s thoughts. He says,

The only book I’d brought with me to the residency, knowing that the house was full of books, was the Library of America edition of Whitman, its paper so thin you could use it to roll cigarettes. I’d brought that particular volume because I was teaching a course

on Whitman next fall, assuming I wasn't on medical leave, and hadn't read him carefully in years—and hadn't read much of his prose at all. (167)

So, as Adam in Madrid in *Leaving the Atocha Station* is always carrying around his precious copy of Ashbery's *Selected Poems*, the narrator of *10:04* brings with him to the residency in Marfa his edition of Whitman's *Poetry and Prose*. He then spends the first days of the residency reading Whitman's "bizarre memoir" (168) *Specimen Days*. At first, the narrator is ambivalent about Whitman, especially about his description of his role during the Civil War. He writes,

The most riveting and disturbing and particular passages of *Specimen Days* are about the Civil War. What disturbed me as I read was what I perceived, rightly or wrongly, as the delight he took in the willingness of young men to die for the union whose epic bard he felt he was destined to be, and his almost sensual pleasure in the material richness of the surrounding carnage. Maybe I was projecting, but when Whitman walks the makeshift hospitals delivering to the wounded gifts of money that the rich have asked him to distribute, when he gives tobacco to those who haven't suffered damage to the lungs or face, I thought he was in a kind of ecstasy. (168-169)

The narrator is noticing here Whitman's hypocrisy as it emerges from his memoir: why is Whitman giving money to the wounded soldiers and why does he not do something that can actually help them in the immediate moment? And why tobacco? The problem, however, does not lie in what he is giving them, but in the way the narrator perceives Whitman's "delight" and "ecstasy" in helping the wounded soldiers. What emerges from Whitman's account seems to be not that these soldiers are victims of the war, but that he is the one who helps them; the focus is on him, not on the wounded. For example, if we take a look at the parts of *Specimen Days* about the money and the gifts the narrator talks about, we can notice why he has this conflicting opinion of Whitman's conduct,

As a very large proportion of the wounded came up from the front without a cent of money in their pockets, I soon discover'd that it was about the best thing I could do to raise their spirits, and show them that somebody cared for them, and practically felt a



fatherly or brotherly interest in them, to give them small sums in such cases, using tact and discretion about it. (Whitman 749-750)

But where did this money come from? It came from “good women and men in Boston, Salem, Providence, Brooklyn, and New York” (Whitman 750) who are apparently too busy to come in person, or perhaps they do not care at all, and they send Whitman to give money to the wounded. He brags about the fact that he “bestowed, as almoner for others, many, many thousands of dollars,” (750) and he immediately contradicts himself by concluding,

I learn'd one thing conclusively—that beneath all the ostensible greed and heartlessness of our times there is no end to the generous benevolence of men and women in the United States, when once sure of their object. Another thing became clear to me—while *cash* is not amiss to bring up the rear, tact and magnetic sympathy and unction are, and ever will be, sovereign still. (750)

He talked about money and gifts for the whole passage, but now he is talking about the importance of “tact and magnetic sympathy and unction” over money. So, one can see why the narrator has this ambivalent feeling towards Whitman and his largesse as emerges from reading his autobiography. The narrator concludes his assessment of *Specimen Days* by writing that “From the distance of my residency late in the empire of drones, his love for the young boys on both sides whose blood was to refresh the tree of liberty was hard to take” (169). It is a powerful image provided here and a critique of both the Civil War and the current wars America is still waging in the Middle East. The “tree of liberty” was “refreshed” by the blood of young boys, but all that Whitman seems to care about is being recognized for his generosity, for his job as a nurse on the battlefields and for what he gives to the wounded.

Hence, at first, the narrator has a contrasting and ambivalent attitude towards Whitman, but this changes as the residency goes on. As a matter of fact, he shares his admiration for Whitman’s poetry by inserting here and there in the book quotations from Whitman’s poems, especially “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” and “Song of Myself.” The interesting thing about this

process is that he inserts phrases taken from Whitman, either with or without quotation marks, but without a reference or an attribution. For example, this happens twice in the book with a verse taken from “Song of Myself.” Compare the following excerpts. Here, the narrator is with Alena, his love interest and the founder of the “Institute for Totaled Art,” and he feels a moment of connection with her,

We chatted for the length of her cigarette about the show—the opening started in an hour or two—most of my consciousness still overwhelmed by her physical proximity, *every atom belonging to her as well belonged to me*, all senses fused into a general supersensitivity, crushed glass sparkling in the asphalt below. (26, emphasis mine)

In this other passage instead, he has just heard the story of Noor, a woman he was working with at the Co-op in Brooklyn that he is part of, and he reasons about the conversation,

What I felt when I tried to take in the skyline—and instead was taken in by it—was a fullness indistinguishable from being emptied, my personality dissolving into a personhood so abstract that *every atom belonging to me as good belonged to Noor*, the fiction of the world rearranging itself around her. (109, emphasis mine)

In these two both different and similar moments, the narrator uses an expression taken from Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” a poem which begins with the famous lines, “I CELEBRATE myself. / And what I assume you shall assume,” followed by the line quoted in *10:04* that in the original is “For every atom belonging to me as goods belongs to you” (Whitman 27). What the narrator is doing here, by quoting this expression taken from Whitman, is to show a certain longing for a specific connection with these two people he is talking to, Alena and especially Noor, who tells a story about the fact that, after her father died, she discovered that he was not really her father. The attention here must be drawn to Whitman’s use of pronouns. As Lerner notes in *The Hatred of Poetry*, “Whitman democratizes pronouns in order to attempt to make room for any reader in his ‘I’ and ‘you,’ so that a celebration of the former is also a celebration of the latter” (47). The implication is, however, that Walt Whitman cannot be a historical person

in this specific passage from “Song of Myself,” and in *Leaves of Grass* as a whole. He is more of a “democratic personhood,” “an enabling fiction produced by the poems themselves – a figure with whom readers can identify, whether in 1855 or in the future.” (*Hatred* 48). That is the Whitmanian project the narrator constantly talks about and this is why he wants to bring forth a similar project. He wants to try to connect with people and it is only thanks to Whitman that he can do it. Nevertheless, Whitman “divulges very little personal information, particulars that might get in the way of our ability to exchange atoms,” and the problem is that Whitman’s dream of “corporate personhood” is never and will not ever be fully realized, because “Whitman comes to stand for the contradictions of a democratic personhood that cannot become actual without becoming exclusive” (*Hatred* 49). In fact,

if he were to reveal the specific genesis and texture of his personality, if he presented a picture of irreducible individuality, he would lose his ability to be “Walt Whitman, a cosmos” – his “I” would belong to an empirical person rather than constituting a pronoun in which the readers of the future could participate. (168)

This is why also Whitman’s memoir *Specimen Days*, as the narrator explains, is an “interesting failure” (168),

Just as in the poems, he has to be nobody in particular in order to be a democratic everyman, has to empty himself out so that his poetry can be a textual commons for the future into which he projects himself. And he is always projecting himself: “I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence; / I project myself—also I return—I am with you, and know how it is. (168)

However, as it has been seen in the first chapter of this dissertation regarding why one should write poems, one must still *try*: here in this specific case trying means attempting to create a connection with others. Whitman does that by continuously projecting himself into the future, as can be seen in the poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” from which the final lines of this last paragraph quoted are taken. The narrator, too, constantly projects himself: he tries to connect with people and most of the time he succeeds in doing so. For example, when he is

contemplating and reasoning about the story he has just heard from Noor, he has a “mild lacrimal event” while he “projected [...] into the future” (109). The interesting thing about the final lines of this paragraph is that, as Dean Katz notices, “should the reader pursue ‘that particular volume’” – the Library of America edition of Whitman’s works – “[...] she will be in for a surprise: while the second line of section 3 exactly reproduces the first line quoted above, the second – ‘I project myself – also I return – I am with you, and know how it is’ – is quite simply not to be found” (329). That happened because Whitman, who was known for constantly revising his work, deleted it from the last version of *Leaves of Grass* which is the one reproduced in the Library of America volume. Thus, “Whitman, with his habit of revising old poems and adding new ones in each new edition of *Leaves of Grass*, projected new futures from pasts which never existed, returning from one future to erase the past in which he promised a projection” (329). In a way, Whitman traveled to the future to do that, and he erased the very lines in which he expressed what he would actually do in the future. In a sense, he acts like another figure evoked in the book, which is Marty McFly, the protagonist of *Back to the Future*, a movie which is central for *10:04* because that is from where the title derives. 10:04 pm is the time Marty travels “back to the future” from 1955 to 1985. Marty McFly, traveling back in time, has changed the future, but his actions risked deleting him from that future, and this “absence of the future,” as Lerner calls it, is reported in the book with a still from the movie (10). On the same level, Whitman travels not back but forward in time, thus doing something that he talked about – projecting himself into the future – and he eliminates the very line in which he talks about that. But author Ben Lerner is able to retrieve that very line, since Whitman’s previous editions of *Leaves of Grass* are widely available, even online, and he reinserts this line in the book, using it and readapting it in order to justify and, in some ways, providing support to the narrator’s actions and thoughts. It is interesting to notice that this line is also the one which ends the book: “I am with you, and I know how it is” (240). Katz argues

that “10:04 ends with a line which was retrospectively made to fade out from the future it imagines, like Marty McFly’s picture, only to find itself inserted into an edition of Whitman in which it doesn’t exist” (329). In this perspective, Lerner uses the text and the language of the poem – and of this novel – to create a world which is very similar to the world to come, as expressed in the epigraph, where “[e]verything will be as it is now, just a little different.” Just as the intertextual reference Lerner makes is the same, but a little different, Lerner creates a world in the novel which is just the same, but a little different. In this sense, the novel works in that field of virtuality which is stressed by Adam Gordon in *Leaving the Atocha Station* and in Lerner’s poetry and criticism.

The influence of Whitman and the identification between the narrator and the great American poet do not end here. The affinity between the narrator and Whitman is also physical. When the narrator arrives at the residency, he decides not to shave:

I walked into the bathroom and got out my razor and looked at myself in the mirror to find much of my face was covered in dark, dried blood; for a moment I was dizzy with fear and confusion, then realized I’d had a nosebleed. [...] I washed the blood off my face with a rag but couldn’t bear, after the shock, to draw a razor across my neck. (166)

He decides not to shave at the beginning because he had a nosebleed caused by the altitude difference between New York and Marfa, but later he writes, “Again, I would find myself standing razor in hand as the sun set, and again I would decide not to shave wondering how long it would take me to grow my neighbor’s beard, obscure my face” (170). It is as if the narrator is trying to identify with both bearded poets that haunt his residency, whom he deeply admires and “visits” (171), but the idea of not shaving and growing a beard evokes Whitman, famous also for having a long beard, “a great sanitary protection for the throat,” as he wrote under the pseudonym “Mose Velsor” in *Manly Health and Training* (287). In the long prose poem that the narrator writes while in Marfa – and that was written and published by Lerner

himself in 2011 – there are also a few lines about shaving – or not shaving – that are linked to Whitman,

[...] now I'm as close  
to a beard as I've been, but not very close.  
Shaving is a way to start the workday by ritually  
not cutting your throat when you've the chance,  
“Washes and razors for foofoos –  
for me freckles and a bristling beard,”  
(174-175)

The lines are taken from this “weird meditative lyric in which I was sometimes Whitman” (170) that the narrator is working on. The last two lines of the excerpt, those between quotation marks, are, again, from Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” The narrator expresses his desire to “be” Whitman, he explicitly says so, and he continuously projects and identifies himself with the poet and the fact that he is growing a beard supports this desire for affinity.

The poem the narrator is writing has been published by historical author Ben Lerner with the title “The Dark Threw Patches Down Upon Me Also,” a title which is taken from a line of Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” and that deals with many themes that the novel also deals with. For example, we have time travel. The speaker of this poem literally travels back in time to “watch him distribute dried fruit and sweet / crackers to soldiers in hospitals, small sums / writing their letters” (*No Art* 257): the “him” is here indubitably Whitman. He also becomes, in the poem, Whitman, “I deliver money to boys with perforated organs” (*No Art* 261) he writes, and he references also both the political situation of Whitman’s time, “your president will be shot in a theater” (*No Art* 261) and the political situation that influenced him to become a poet, “actors will be presidents” (*No Art* 261). The first president is indisputably Abraham Lincoln, shot in a theater by an actor; the actor who becomes president is Ronald Reagan, in a way an important figure for the narrator and the one whose speech inspired him,

in a sense, to become a poet, as he recounts in *10:04*. Other themes explored by this long prose poem are the same as in the book: the value of immigrant labor, time travel, *Back to the Future*, Brooklyn, the Marfa Lights and the preoccupation with nuclear catastrophe and disaster. Overall, the poem is a prelude to what will become the novel, and in this sense, “It’s among the greatest poems and fails / because it wants to become real and can / only become prose” (267). The speaker here is perhaps talking about the Whitmanian project either of *Specimen Days* or, maybe, about “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” since the subsequent lines talk about Brooklyn, but he may be as well talking about this poem we are reading. Poetry, as we already have seen, cannot be actualized because it belongs to the realm of the virtual, but it is exactly from this that it derives its power, and it “can only become prose,” thus *10:04*. In this sense, the words Katz used to describe “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” can also be applied in describing “The Dark Threw Patches Down Upon Me Also,” considering that the name is taken from that poem. About Whitman’s poem, he writes that “it is very much a poem of time travel: one of the poem’s most striking effects is its ability to divide its ‘nows’ between the ‘now’ of the moment of writing and the ‘now’ of the moment of reading, giving its deictics the uncanny feel of occupying two moments at once – a technique Lerner also adopts in various places in its novel” (328), and, as we have just seen, in his poems.

The complete and total identification between the narrator and Whitman, the moment in which, I would argue, the narrator makes peace with Whitman’s contradictions and embraces the totality of his project, is when he, too, lives a Whitman-like experience. In Marfa, the narrator meets somebody he knew from New York and these people bring him at first to see the Chinati foundation – where Donald Judd’s works are exhibited – and then they invite him to dinner. After the dinner, the group of people moves to a house party where the guests, the narrator included, get drunk and do drugs. What happens is that a young intern working at the foundation starts to freak out after he snort ketamine and gets sick. The narrator helps him, and

he then describes a Whitmanesque situation in which he acts as a nurse and a caretaker for the young man, exactly like Whitman did with the wounded soldiers of the Civil War. The narrator comforts the intern by telling him, ““You’re going to be okay,” [...] ‘The worst is over. I am with you,’ I quoted, ‘and I know how it is’” (186). Again, the recurring lines from “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” These lines become a refrain for the narrator, who seems to realize how to care for others, how to move beyond the self, “from irony to sincerity.” This is something that a character like Adam Gordon would have never done, being too self-involved and not very much caring about others. The narrator of *10:04* writes that although “the whole scene was ridiculous,” “his fear and my sympathy were genuine” (188). The identification is made explicit, “With his arm around my shoulder and mine around his waist, I walked him slowly inside, a parody of Whitman, the poet-nurse, and his wounded charge” (188). The narrator puts the young man to bed, and he adds that “Whitman would have kissed him. Whitman would have taken the intern’s fear of the loss of identity as seriously as a dying soldier’s” (190). It is not that the narrator does not take the intern’s fears seriously, it is that even if he identifies with Whitman, he is no Whitman and this whole situation is no war. Thus, he comforts the intern in the only way he knows how, by talking and telling him stories. He talks about the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge, completed in 1883, an infrastructure that, ironically, would decrease the number of people taking the ferry from Brooklyn to Manhattan or vice-versa, in this way putting an end to the excitement Whitman felt while on the ferry, as he wrote in the aforementioned poem. But the construction of the bridge works as a projection to that future Whitman talks about and the bridge becomes also a bridge that connects the past of Whitman, the present of the narrator, and the future that both Whitman and the narrator envision. It is significant that in the last section of the book the narrator and his friend Alex walk on the bridge from Manhattan towards their future as parents. Therefore, the identification with Whitman seems complete. He had a Whitman-like experience and now he knows what to make of it.



Certainly, there is a risk that the narrator, too, might fall into Whitman's rhetoric of contradiction and hypocrisy, but from the way the scene with the intern is told, we perceive this "tenderness" (191) and also the sincerity that the narrator feels for another person.

The last point of connection between Whitman and the narrator in the Marfa chapter is the idea of "loafing." The narrator talks about loafing in opposition to labor, and he connects it to Whitman when he wakes up to the sound of the Mexican workers who are fixing his roof,

One morning, which was for me late at night, I'd fallen asleep with the Whitman in my lap when I was awoken by the sound of hammering on the roof above me, the first real interruption of my ghostly rhythm. Then I heard tinny music on a portable radio, voices in Spanish: men were working on the roof. (171-172)

He soon discovers that the workers are Mexicans, or at least he supposes so because they speak Spanish and listen to Norteño music, and he tries "to imagine how they imagined me or the other residents in the houses they maintained, residents whose labor could be hard to tell apart from leisure, from loafing" (172). Here, a concern typical of artists and of poets, in particular, is addressed: how can someone who is not an artist distinguish between the moment an artist is working from the moment he is not? The narrator earlier in the book says that "Whitman is always 'loafing,' always taking his ease, as if leisure were a condition of poetic receptivity" (168). Author Ben Lerner explores this concept of loafing, especially as it relates to Whitman, in his book-length essay *The Hatred of Poetry*. He writes that what is fascinating about Whitman "is his claim that, on the one hand he's doing the most important work that can be done [...] and, on the other hand he's doing no work at all: he's always 'loafing,' taking his ease" (50). As one can see, he uses words similar to those of *10:04*'s narrator, in a manner that is distinct of Lerner's poetics. Lerner then observes that Whitman is indeed fascinated by the American worker, as the poem "I hear America singing" shows, "but he doesn't want to be one" (*Hatred* 51). For Lerner, this is because Whitman wants to stand for everybody, *be* everybody, so he cannot just do one job because otherwise, he would sing only about the people

who are doing his same job. “Whitman can’t take sides:” he “can sing difference but cannot differentiate himself without compromising his labor – which is part of why his labor has to be a kind of leisure, a profession that transcends the professions” (*Hatred* 51). In this view, his work as a nurse during the Civil War is also significant and shows that: he cannot fight, but he can help those people who were willing to sacrifice themselves for the future of the United States (*Hatred* 51). Lerner connects the Whitmanian notion of “loafing” to the fact that people generally think that poets and artists do not do any “actual” work. And this is exactly

because of the contradictory nature of the poetic vocation – it is both more and less than work, its usefulness depends on its lack of practical utility – that we are embarrassed by and disdainful of the poet’s labor. ‘Poetry’ is supposed to signify an alternative to the kind of value that circulates in the economy as we live it daily, but actual poems can’t realize that alternative. (*Hatred* 52)

Lerner’s preoccupation with poetry and that of the narrator of *10:04* are very similar to Adam Gordon’s concerns regarding the role of poetry in *Leaving the Atocha Station*. However, in *10:04*, with Whitman’s help, poetry, and art more generally, take a step forward. It is still not explicit whether the virtual, the transcendental, the Absolute or “the world to come” can be grasped, but what we must do is keep trying to reach out. The idea of a possible alternative, or alternatives, to this world, is alive and must be kept alive because poetry’s power derives directly from this. The projection into the future, the reaching out towards the collectivity are all lessons that the narrator of *10:04* has learned from Whitman. In this sense, “Walt Whitman is himself a *place* for the genuine, an open space or textual commons where American readers of the future can forge and renew their sense of possibility and interconnectedness” (*Hatred* 49). At the end of the Marfa chapter, the narrator reconciles with Whitman, and this reconciliation leads to the writing of the very book we are reading: “I’d been hard on Whitman during my residency, hard on his impossible dream, but standing there with Creeley after my long day and ridiculous night, I decided to replace the book I’d proposed with the book you’re

reading now” (194). Hence, thinking that a different world, a better world – even if just a little different – is possible, allows the narrator to “dilate the story [...] into an actual present with multiple futures” (194). Just like Whitman in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” the narrator addresses the people of the future and the “you” is inserted into the text exactly for this purpose. Whitman, according to Tom Evans, addresses “the American people, present, and future. He addresses them, moreover, with sympathy. [...] And he not only addresses individual readers. He addresses the American people as a whole” (n.p.). Lerner then, having learned the lesson of Whitman, synthesizes this political appeal “to the second person plural” with “the knowing methods of modern fiction” used “to make his appeal convincing, sympathetic” (Evans n.p.). Thus, Evans concludes, the techniques of modern fiction are employed in the book “to do moral work” (n.p.). In the next section, it will be shown what these techniques are and how their employment in this book works in this perspective.

### **3.3 How ‘Auto’ is Autofiction?<sup>7</sup>**

In *10:04*, the techniques of autofiction and metafiction introduced in *Leaving the Atocha Station* are again employed by the author, but also taken to the next level. If in the first novel we had at least a first-person narrator with a specific name different from the author, in this second novel we have an apparently nameless narrator. The name of the narrator may or may not be “Ben,” because the explicit mention of the name occurs only once in the novel and we do not even know if it refers to the narrator or to the protagonist of the narrator’s novel about the forged correspondence. “Ben” is mentioned only as the addressee of the fake letter he is writing in the manner of Creeley, “*Dear Ben, I put down, I too found it a pleasure meeting you, albeit briefly, in Providence, though in such a crowd little conversation was possible. But to put a face to the name, as they say, if they still say that, and I hope there will be another*

---

<sup>7</sup> The title refers to Christian Lorentzen’s article published on *Vulture*. <http://www.vulture.com/2018/05/how-auto-is-autofiction.html>

*occasion soon to be in each other's company*" (127). This happens because we have more than one level of "fictionality" that Lerner plays with. For example, we are told by the narrator of *10:04*, who is a poet, exactly like Lerner and Adam Gordon, that he has published a successful first novel that did not sell much but had "an alarming level of critical acclaim" (154). Plus, he constantly refers to this novel which has many points in common with *Leaving the Atocha Station*. Chapter 2 of *10:04* repeats verbatim a short story Lerner published in *The New Yorker* in 2012, "The Golden Vanity," and is here attributed to the narrator of *10:04*. The narrator talks about the writing process of this story, what inspired him and how it was written, providing the reader a glimpse of the process of writing and indicating why critics came to define the book "a meta-fictional masterpiece" (Temple). He talks about writing the short story beginning from what inspired him. During a screening of Chris Marclay's *The Clock*, the narrator finds himself formulating an idea about a story he has in mind, which draws inspiration from what happens to him and to the people who surrounds him. We can see why this long movie he is seeing, which is an art project rather than a conventional movie, fascinates him. *The Clock* is, as the narrator tells us,

a twenty-four-hour montage of thousands of scenes from movies and a few from TV edited together so as to be shown in real time; each scene indicates the time with a shot of a timepiece or its mention in dialogue; time in and outside of the film is synchronized. Marclay and a team of assistants spent several years sifting through a century of film for possible footage for their collage. (52)

*The Clock* is a work of art in which the distinction between the fictional time of the movies and TV series is diluted and synchronized with nonfictional duration, something which deeply attracts the narrator and pushes him to reason about fictional and nonfictional time. But instead of "collapsing fictional time into real time," something which would nullify the "distance between art and life, fantasy and reality" (54) what happens to him is the complete opposite. While he is at the screening, he looks at the time on his telephone even though the real time is

being shown on the screen. He concludes that “that distance hadn’t collapsed for me at all; while the duration of a real minute and *The Clock*’s minute were mathematically indistinguishable, they were nevertheless minutes from different worlds” (54). Hence, these ideas he comes up with during the screening of *The Clock*, while he is looking at the time on another device, lead him to conclude that watching time is not the same as experiencing it. In this sense, *The Clock* is, too, a kind of fiction: “As I made and unmade a variety of overlapping narratives out of its found footage, I felt acutely how many different days could be built out of a day, felt more possibility than determinism, the utopian glimmer of fiction” (54). This experience inspires him to write more fiction, “something I’d promised my poet friends I wasn’t going to do” (54). He then goes on to write an outline of the story, on how he will change names and situations, drawing inspiration from his experience and from the people he knows:

The story would involve a series of transpositions: I would shift my medical problem to another part of the body; replace astereognosis with another disorder, displace Alex’s oral surgery. I would change names: Alex would become Liza, which she’d told me once had been her mother’s second choice; Alena would become Hannah; Sharon I’d change to Mary, Jon to Josh; Dr. Andrews to Dr. Roberts, etc. Instead of becoming a literary executor, and so confronting the tension between biological and textual mortality through that obligation, the protagonist—a version of myself; I’d call him “the author”—would be approached by a university about selling his papers. (54-55)

The thing that surprises the reader about this is not that the narrator is just writing a story drawing from his autobiography – this is something that writers have always done, and he is, after all, a writer – but that the story is excerpted in the following chapter, and we have the background of how it came to be. As already said, this story was written by Lerner himself and is here reattributed to the narrator of *10:04*. We do not know, and we cannot know exactly if the processes of composition and inspiration for this story are similar to the actual processes of composition and inspiration that historical author Ben Lerner had. Yet, we do know for sure

that Ben Lerner is not the narrator of *10:04*, even though the line between fiction and facts is blurred, and it can also be suggested that this description of the process of composition is a fiction. It is thanks to this story, we are told, that the narrator is able to get a “strong six-figure” advance if he promises to turn it into a novel (4). The story, entitled “The Golden Vanity,” is about an author – literally referred to as “the author” – who deals with the success he encountered after publishing his first novel, a situation which the narrator of *10:04* and Lerner himself have also experienced. The novel described closely resembles *Leaving the Atocha Station*. “The Golden Vanity” is told in third-person, and here is the part which refers to a novel very similar to Lerner’s first,

Since late the previous spring, when he’d published his novel to unexpected praise, the women his friends attempted to set him up with had invariably read his book, or had at least glanced, in advance of their meeting, at those preview pages available online at Amazon. This meant that instead of the conventional conversations about work, favorite neighborhoods, and so on, he’d likely be asked what parts of his book were autobiographical. Even if these questions weren’t posed explicitly, he could see, or thought he saw, his interlocutor testing whatever he said and did against the text. And because his narrator was characterized above all by his anxiety regarding the disconnect between his internal experience and his social self-presentation, the more intensely the author worried about distinguishing himself from the narrator, the more he felt he had become him. (65-66)

Here, Lerner, through his fiction, is addressing the problem of the reception of one’s fiction into the world, making references to classical questions that authors often get asked, and that concern matters of reality, truth, and authenticity. About this strategy, Lerner has said that the story, among other things,

explores the relation between an author and the fictional persona he creates. And that was no doubt on my mind in part because, as you say, I recently published my first novel, which goes out of its way to blur the boundary between literature and life. I suppose that publishing such a book—reencountering that highly fictionalized version

of myself in the world—was a little like relating to myself at once in the first person and the third. (Interview with Leyshon)

This feeling and this idea of reencountering one's fictional self into the world is at the basis of *10:04*, too, and not only of "The Golden Vanity." For instance, when the narrator of the novel is talking to his friend Alex about the story and about the fact that to him "writing has a kind of magical power" (138), he recounts what happened while he was writing his first novel, "In my novel the protagonist tells people his mother is dead, when she's alive and well" (138). That is exactly what Adam Gordon does in *Leaving the Atocha Station*, when he tells the people he meets that his mother is dead, but he is also afraid that what he is doing could have a real effect on the world. Adam worries about the fact that he could have traded his mother's life "for the sympathy of an attractive stranger" (*Atocha* 29). The narrator of *10:04* tells something more about this,

Halfway through writing the book, my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer and I felt, however insanely, that the novel was in part responsible, that having even a fictionalized version of myself producing bad karma around parental health was in some unspecifiable way to blame for the diagnosis. I stopped work on the novel and was resolved to trash it until my mom—who was doing perfectly well after a mastectomy and who, thankfully, hadn't had to do chemo—convinced me over the course of a couple of months to finish the book. (138)

What Lerner is portraying here is, again, how one's fiction could influence the world, how an author deals with his fiction once he "releases" it in the world, and how fiction could – or could not – have "real" effects on the actual world. What is difficult to disentangle, especially for a writer, is the result and consequences of one's creative endeavors. After all, a novel is the fruit of one's imagination which wills it into being, thus reality – more generally – may be the fruit of one's imagination as well.

From this whole concatenation of situations and events, I will try to attempt a reconstruction of how all these fictional levels work in Lerner's oeuvre. We can infer, in

reading Lerner's novels side by side, that perhaps the narrator of *10:04* is the author of *Leaving the Atocha Station*, as Lerner suggests too in an interview with Karl Smith at *The Quietus* (n.p.). Both Adam Gordon and the nameless narrator of the second novel are stand-ins for Lerner, but what happens is that Lerner creates the narrator of *10:04*, who, in turns, invents both 'Adam Gordon' from *Atocha* and "the author" from "The Golden Vanity." "The author" from "The Golden Vanity" talks about his first novel that strikingly resembles *Atocha*, too. These different levels of fictionality are carefully weaved and intertwined by historical author Ben Lerner, who creates an incredible "Chinese box of a novel" (n.p.), as Maggie Nelson writes in *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. These different fictional levels are always questioned though, for example when Lerner introduces his wife, "Ari" into the text of both "The Golden Vanity" and *10:04*. The first mention is in the story. While 'the author' is on vacation in Florida for the winter holidays with his parents and his brother, he brings with him Hannah, his current love interest. While he is on the beach with his brother and his brother's wife, he is asked, "Where's Ari? Did she go to bed already or is she coming?" Then, he answers that "She isn't in this story" (77). "Ari" probably refers to Ben Lerner's wife, Ariana Mangual, and her name here "appears only to gleefully disrupt any residual claims of verisimilitude in an already splintered and mirrored narrative" (Max n.p.). The author, after the realization that Ari is not part of the story, says, "I've divided myself into two people, a cut across worlds" (78). In this sense, Ari is a "present absence" in the book, just like the daughter of the narrator's mentors Bernard and Natali is (38) and the towers in the Manhattan skyline are (109). She "haunts" the book in some ways, she is a phantom, like Creeley, because she perhaps influenced the writing of this book but is not in it. What is in it, however, is probably a version, or different versions of herself. In *10:04* she is mentioned another time towards the end, where she is linked to Bernard's daughter and to Liza from "The Golden Vanity." When the narrator and Alex are walking back from Manhattan to Brooklyn, he writes that



A cab surprised us as we turned onto Park Place, the felt absence of the twin towers now difficult to distinguish from the invisible buildings. I had the sensation that if power were suddenly restored, the towers would be there, swaying a little. Although I could see that someone was in the back of the car, someone I imagined as on both sides of the poem—Bernard and Natali’s daughter, Liza, Ari—I tried to hail the cab; I’d heard cabs could pick up multiple fares as a result of the storm, fares from multiple worlds, but it didn’t stop for us. (237)

The “felt absence” of the towers is similar to the “present absence” of the women he mentions here. These female characters are all connected to the love life of the narrator of the story and of the book and of historical author Ben Lerner, and perhaps it can be argued that all these female characters are loosely based on Ariana herself, who is here mentioned with her possible fictional counterparts.

Despite the presence of these signposts that evoke a reality that exists outside the fiction of the book, *10:04* is and remains a work of fiction. This can be inferred immediately from the para-text of the book, which is referred to as “a novel” even on its cover. But Lerner has also stressed this in many interviews. For example, Tao Lin argues that it is “fiction that pretends to be fact,” (2014) but is still fiction and it concerns more a matter of how real and authentic this work of fiction *feels* rather than actually *is*. As Lerner declared, “[...] for me fiction is most powerful when it feels enough like the world and enough like yourself that the differences are really charged” (Interview with Christopher Bollen n.p.). Alex Preston in *The Guardian* described this novel as “a work of fiction that never quite believes in its own fictitiousness, a novel that fails and fails again at being novelistic” (n.p.).

In this sense, this is what is meant when critics argue that in the novel the lines between facts and fiction are blurred and they speak about “autofiction.” The French writer Serge Doubrovsky coined the term “autofiction” when he tried to describe his first novel, *Fils*, in 1977. He devised it in response to Philippe Lejeune’s notion of the “autobiographical pact,” first introduced in the book *Le Pacte Autobiographique* in 1975. In this work, Lejeune talks

about a pact, a contract that the author and the reader enter into, which supposes an identification between the author, the narrator, and the main character when one refers to a book as an autobiography. “Autobiography (narrative recounting of the life of the author)” – writes Lejeune – “supposes that there is *identity of name* between the author (such as s/he figures, by name, on the cover), the narrator of the story and the character who is being talked about” (*On Autobiography* 12). Hence, a written work is an autobiography if the name of the author, of the narrator and of the (main) character of the book correspond; if this does not happen, we do not have an autobiographical work but a work of fiction. For example, if we apply this notion to Lerner’s books, this definition identifies *Leaving the Atocha Station* strictly as a novel, since the name of the author and the name of the narrator and main character differ. On the other hand, if we consider *10:04*, we can see that there are some problems in the identification. One can assume that the name of the narrator of Lerner’s second book is indeed Ben, as the text may suggest, and thus the identification between author, narrator, and character can work towards the definition of the book as autobiographical. However, Lerner continuously stresses the fact that his book is a work of fiction, something that, in some ways, “breaks” Lejeune’s pact: if we consider the book to have a specific identification between the three entities, *10:04* cannot be a work of fiction. Lerner said that if “[e]verybody in the first book is made up,” in *10:04* something *is* real, for example,

the Alena character’s art project is nonfiction—it’s the work of the artist Elka Krajewska—but Alena and Elka have zero relation beyond that. And the dinosaur book is based on a book I co-wrote with a great kid I tutored, but the “Roberto” character doesn’t resemble him very much. Again, Krajewska’s art project, the dinosaur book—those are species of readymades, like my poem or the *New Yorker* story. (Interview with Tao Lin 2014 n.p.)

So, although the work of art is “a triumph teetering at the edge of fiction,” (Temple n.p.) it still remains fiction. However, it is a particular kind of fiction, and this is where Doubrovsky and

his notion of “autofiction” can be useful. Here it is what he wrote on the back cover of his novel *Fils* (1977),

Autobiography? No, that is a privilege reserved for the important people of this world, at the end of their lives, in a refined style. Fiction, of events and facts strictly real; autofiction, if you will, to have entrusted the language of an adventure to the adventure of language, outside of the wisdom and the syntax of the novel, traditional or new. Interactions, threads of words, alliterations, assonances, dissonances, writing before or after literature, concrete, as we say, music. (n.p.)

Thus, autofiction seems to be concerned more with matters of language, at least at the beginning of its formulation, and, as Cusset notices, this meant that “the only fiction in autofiction is the work on language. The facts are real, and the project is to reach a certain truth” (n.p.). After the introduction of the notion of the unconscious by Freud, memory becomes fallible. Doubrovsky, thus, stresses the importance of language in the perspective inherited by psychoanalysis, derived from Freud but mostly from Lacan, according to which it is only thanks to language that we are able to discover the structure of our unconscious, which turns out to be very similar to language itself, “Writing an autobiographical novel means, in this perspective, to confide in the power of writing, [...] using words as probes capable of revealing the structure of the unconscious”<sup>8</sup> (Mazza Galanti n.p.).

However, the term has evolved throughout the years and its definition is always getting updated for each current literary epoch. For example, Vincent Colonna develops, in his 1989 doctoral thesis, the first deviation from Doubrovsky’s argument. As Karen Ferreira-Meyers explains,

According to Colonna, the term autofiction encompasses all the processes of fictionalization of the Self, the other main feature of the autofictional process, insofar as the author is fantasizing his own existence, a project in which imaginary characters are more or less close extensions of his/her Self. For him, it is the exploration of the

---

<sup>8</sup> The original article is in Italian, all translations are mine.

literary imagination that is valued, and the only criterion used is that of identifying the writer as a character of his story, using the first person singular or even by designating his/her Self more indirectly – provided that the identification remains obvious to the reader. (n.p.)

Thus, Colonna proposes some examples from classic literature like Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, works in which the author is present as a character in his fictional work. However, this is not how autofiction is exactly intended, since what Colonna excludes from his argument is the fact that "autofiction" usually refers to a work that blurs the lines between what is real and what is fictional, and not just the fact that an author inserts him or herself in the fictional text as a character. What he does not seem to take into account is the notion of *indecisiveness*, as Carlo Mazza Galanti observes, something that we now identify with the "autofictional universe," which is nowadays considered as a "perfectly hybrid space where reality continues to make demands towards a hidden fiction, hinted, suggested, but incapable of taking over and building a clear generic frame" (n.p.). This disorientation warns us to interpret certain elements of a book as real or invented. In this perspective, autobiography, too, is now considered, despite its claim of being factual and non-fictional, "inevitably constructive, or imaginative" resisting "a clear distinction from its fictional relatives (autofiction, autobiographical novel), leaving the generic borderlines blurred" (Schwalm n.p.). Thus, it is not surprising that the narrator of *10:04* tends to find himself in a position of liminality in this hybrid space that keeps oscillating between reality and fiction. For example, when Alex first reads "The Golden Vanity" and discovers that the narrator literally took her condition and applied it to his main character, she jokingly suggests that he should pay for her surgery, something the narrator agrees and even begs her to do. He notices that "it's a nice crossing of reality and fiction, which is what the story is about in the first place" (57). As already seen, "The Golden Vanity" is indeed about this, but what must be remembered is that it has also been published in the real world by Lerner himself. Not only the story is about the

“crossing of reality and fiction,” but the book as a whole is, too. About this, we can take a look, for example, also at the end of Part 3, when the narrator is asked by the agent how he will expand the story into a novel. He answers by telling her that he “will make a long list of things that quicken the heart” [...] “And you can be on it,” he says, referring to the agent (158). What happens, as we know, is that she definitely becomes part of the book, a character in it, and we meet her from the very first page.

Yet, it must be underlined that all of this has to be read from the perspective of an *illusion* of reality that the writer consciously wants to portray in a work of art. As Christian Lorentzen argues, Lerner’s book does not lack artifice, it is a novel after all, “but the artifice is in service of creating the sensation that there’s no artifice, which is the whole point” (“How ‘Auto’ is Autofiction?” n.p.). What one must do is to analyze the etymology of the word “autofiction.” The term is composed of two words: “auto” and “fiction.” “Auto” derives from “autobiographical,” thus, when talking about a book that we could consider autofiction, we have to ask ourselves where is the stress, on the autobiography or on the fiction? As Cusset writes in the speech “The Limits of Autofiction,” a writer like the French Annie Ernaux does not want to be labeled as a writer of autofiction, because she claims that everything in her book has really happened, thus there’s no fiction, only autobiography (n.p.). On the other hand, Lorentzen argues that no matter what a writer declares, the stress is always on fiction, because,

It only takes a few gestures toward the real — age and other markers of demographic identity, status as a writer and other career details — to blur the line in the reader’s mind between an author and a character. From there an entire fictional world can be generated, scenarios that never happened or people who never existed. (“How ‘Auto’ is Autofiction?” n.p.)

Lerner plays with this porous border between fiction and non-fiction also when he inserts in the book materials he already published elsewhere. Other than “The Golden Vanity,” this happens at least two other times in *10:04*. There is a piece of criticism about art and

vandalism that Lerner published in *Harper's Magazine* entitled "Damage Control," which is partly excerpted and used in describing Alena's "Institute for Toted Art." Moreover, in Part 4, we have a few lines from the poem Lerner published after his residency in Marfa, which is not named in the book but was published as "The Dark Threw Patches Down Upon Me Also," as we have already seen in the previous chapter. This is nothing new for Lerner, who did the same in *Leaving the Atocha Station*, by inserting in the novel words from an essay on John Ashbery and from one of his poems published in *The Lichtenberg Figures* (2004), his first book of poetry. In *10:04*, however, this is more interesting because the identification between the author and the narrator is less clear. The essay "Damage Control" talks about the impression that the damaged works of art collected in Elka Krajeweska's "Salvage Art Institute" had on Lerner, and this becomes the same impression that the narrator of *10:04* has when he visits the fictional counterpart called the "Institute for Toted Art." Some words are exactly the same, as if the text is "just as it is, but a little different," exactly as the apparently damaged works of art feel to both the narrator and Lerner, especially those that do not have clear marks that indicate their damaging, which become "art outside capitalism" (Lerner, "Damage Control," 49). The poem instead, written during Lerner's actual residency in Marfa, draws inspiration from Whitman, as already seen in the previous chapter. The poem itself is autofictional, too, on the same level, because it includes elements of the poet's biography, even if those elements are a little changed. Nevertheless, what happens here is the same that happens with "The Golden Vanity:" the narrator of *10:04* becomes the author of the poem – which is not named in the novel – and the original work written by historical author Ben Lerner is recontextualized in the text. About this process, Lerner said that "the story and the poem are obviously changed by being placed in the novel, so in a sense they are no longer the works that preceded the novel. [...] while they're materially identical – every word is the same – they're utterly transformed. Like a world to come" (Interview with Tao Lin 2014 n.p.). This is very similar to what happens

in Jorge Luis Borges' short story "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*." In the story, we are told about Pierre Menard, a 20<sup>th</sup>-century French author who wanted to rewrite Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. As the narrator of the story writes, "he had no intention of copying it. His admirable ambition was to produce a number of pages which coincided – word for word and line for line – with those of Miguel de Cervantes" (Borges 91). Then, the narrator compares the two texts, the one written by Cervantes and the one written by Menard and argues that "[t]he Cervantes text and the Menard text are verbally identical but the second is almost infinitely richer" (Borges 94). It is "infinitely richer" because about three hundred years have passed between the two authors and, consequently, many things happened and the context in which the work is produced – or rather, *read* – is entirely different. The narrator cites the following quote which is identical in both Cervantes' and Menard's *Don Quixote*, "... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor" (Borges 94). This is in Cervantes a "mere rhetorical praise of history" (Borges 94) but becomes in Menard something which is close to the pragmatism of William James, Menard's contemporary: "Menard defines history not as a *delving into reality* but as the very *fount* of reality" (Borges 94). Thus, what happens in Borges' story is similar to what happens in *10:04*. In Lerner's novel, the story and the poem – but also the essay on art and vandalism – become something different because they are put in a different context. Their paternity changes, it switches from historical author Ben Lerner to the fictional narrator of *10:04*. Moreover, they are also embedded in a narrative that tells us how they got written – we are given the condition and the motivation that moved the writer to produce a specific work. We already have seen how this happens to the story. The same happens with the poem, which is intertwined with the prose that surrounds it, maintaining that idea of virtuality that Adam Gordon talks about in *Leaving the Atocha Station* and Lerner reprises in *The Hatred of Poetry*, "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” (*Atocha* 9). When the narrator is working on the poem in Marfa, he ponders about it by writing that

the poem, like most of my poems, and like the story I’d promised to expand, conflated fact and fiction, and it occurred to me – not for the first time, but with a new force – that part of what I loved about poetry was how the distinction between fiction and nonfiction didn’t obtain, how the correspondence between text and world was less important than the intensities of the poem itself, what possibilities of feeling were opened up in the present tense of reading. (170-171)

The inclusion of the lines of the poem in the prose of the book contributes to the creation of even more confusion and commingling of facts and fiction, which is brought to another level. Some elements of the poem are real – the residency, the experience of reading *Specimen Days*, the presence of the workers – while some others are not – in it he travels in time, he is visited by the ghosts of dead poets, and he also “becomes” Whitman. Even if not at all the same, it can be suggested that the novel, too, does similar things: it mixes facts and fiction, “a meta-fiction preoccupied with the mysterious alchemical reaction that turns life into art” (Lapidos). In the end, the book becomes “a work of art that, like a poem, is neither fiction or nonfiction but a flickering between them” (194). It can be argued that the novel is able to create an illusion of reality that makes readers perceive that what they are reading is real. The success for a novel of this kind lies in the writing, in the style of the author who is able to convey this illusion. As Lerner writes in *The Los Angeles Review of Books* while reviewing the third volume of Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle*,

Perhaps it’s less that we identify with the particular experiences Knausgaard recounts than that his writing makes us feel we might be able to recall our own past, near or distant, with all the texture and urgency of an inhabited present. This is why the extreme inclusiveness of Knausgaard’s attention – and the flatness of the language in which it’s



conveyed – is so important: it feels universal, less interested in the exceptional life than in the way any life can feel exceptional to its subject (even if it sometimes feels exceptionally boring). Much of *My Struggle* isn't a story so much as an immersive environment. (n.p.)

*My Struggle* is both very different but also quite similar to *10:04* because it is concerned with similar issues; *The New York Times* critic Dwight Garner even called Lerner “a young Brooklynite version of the Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard” (n.p.). The appeal that such works of autofiction have to readers lies in the *how* rather than in the *what*. What an author talks about in his book is definitely important, but in order to provide a greater impact on readers and critics alike, one must also know how to use the techniques of writing, as both Lerner and Knausgaard do masterfully. In an article in which he talks about the rise of autofiction in the current literary landscape, Jonathon Sturgeon, citing both Lerner and Knausgaard, writes that, in this current literary landscape (of 2014),

the infamous postmodern “pastiche” [is] anywhere to be found [...]. These authors have rejected the old patchwork of genres and styles and myths primarily because the life of the author is now the novel's organizing principle. And life, drained of religiosity, often leads to questions of the body and its environment. It's not surprising, then, that [...] Lerner's *10:04* frequently considers the impact of ecological disaster. And Lerner himself suggests that Knausgaard's *My Struggle* “isn't a story so much as an immersive environment.” (n.p.)

In this sense, Ben Lerner's *10:04* can be considered a *contemporary* novel that deals with very contemporary themes such as climate change, global warming and the problems deriving from capitalism. Just as the autofictional techniques of the book are concerned with the relationship between the self and fiction, some other elements of the book show what it means to live on a warming planet dominated by the economic logic of capitalism and the market, and this is what makes *10:04* a novel of the Anthropocene.

### 3.4 A novel of the Anthropocene

*10:04* is set in a specific period of time, between two hurricanes, Irene in 2011 and Sandy in 2012; although the second is not explicitly mentioned in the novel, these are the storms that the book unmistakably refers to. Thus, the story spans a period which covers a little more than a year and is bookended by these two catastrophic events. Disaster is one of the main themes that can be associated with the novel. The possible destruction precipitated by these storms is closely connected to matters concerning the environment. Ben de Bruyn, in his “Realism 4°. Objects, weather, and infrastructure in Ben Lerner’s *10:04*,” defines Lerner’s novel as “a rare example of a contemporary climate-change novel” (951) and there are some aspects of the novel that help support this idea. For example, one of the many refrains of the novel is that it is always “unseasonably warm.” It is repeated seven times in the book, and this constant repetition can have a twofold meaning. On the one hand, since Lerner is a poet and we are reading a fragmentary novel, these refrains can work as signposts in order to remind the reader that what she is reading is the same novel, in a fashion that recalls epic poetry (like “when rosy-fingered dawn appeared” in Homer), where these refrains and repetitions helped the rhapsode in the same fashion, because he had to perform the text. On the other hand, these continuous repetitions convey the idea that the planet is definitely warming, that something is not right; they assume the connotation, as Gabriel Roth argues, of “a familiar unit of atmospheric description that becomes increasingly ominous” (n.p.). As a matter of fact, since the beginning, the narrator of *10:04* and his friend Alex walk together “on a warming planet” (7) while Roberto, the kid the narrator tutors, is afraid of, among many things, by global warming (13). It is interesting to take a look at a scene in which the narrator and Roberto are

working on a project which involves dinosaurs, and while they are cutting shapes of dinosaurs, the child talks about his fears,

[...] Roberto returned to a subject that had entered his dreams since he'd watched a show on the Discovery Channel about the advent of a second ice age.

“When all the skyscrapers freeze they're going to fall down like September eleventh,” he said in his typically cheerful tone, but more quietly, “and crush everyone.”  
(12)

Roberto mentions here September 11<sup>th</sup>, but he links it to the fact that he is afraid that buildings will fall down, exactly as had happened on that specific day. The narrator tries to reassure him by saying, “Maybe if it started getting really cold the scientists would figure out a new heating system for the buildings [...]” (13). But Roberto is still not convinced and inserts “global warming” into the conversation, which prompts the narrator to tell him something he does not completely believe in, namely that he does not think that there will be another ice age. He then adds that he lied, “cutting out another extinct animal” (13). We can notice the irony of this passage: Roberto, just a kid, nonetheless has very real and concrete fears such as the prospect of global warming, and the narrator finds himself in the awkward position of trying to reassure him. He lies, he is cutting “another extinct animal,” imagining perhaps that, in the future, man could be that extinct animal, since global warming is definitely real, endangering mankind, and if one does not do anything about this, men will end up like dinosaurs. It is worth emphasizing that this scene suggests is that the extinction of dinosaurs was caused by an ice age, while the extinction of human beings could occur thanks to global warming, the exact opposite.

Issues of climate change and global warming are intrinsic to the idea of the Anthropocene, the term which some geologists use to define the current geological era. As Adam Trexler observes in his book *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*, from 2000, “a group of geologists, led by the Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen, began to argue the present period of Earth's history should be known as the Anthropocene,” (1)

understood as a period which follows the Holocene, a geological era that lasted roughly 11,700 years, the span of time passed since the last ice age. “Anthropocene” concerns a geological era in which the impact of humankind on the planet is bigger than the impact the planet has ever had on humankind, and this is happening for the first time in the history of the world. Since “humans have significantly altered Earth’s land surface, oceans, rivers, atmosphere, flora, and fauna,” the Anthropocene focuses on “the here and now and on what humans have done and can do in the future.” The word itself has become “a call to action for environmental sustainability and responsibility” (Edwards n.p.). Thus, fiction seems to have responded to this “call to arms” by trying to depict the impact humans have on the world, but Trexler suggests that realist novels do not seem to be able to tackle the issue of global warming and climate change. The best novels that have helped to introduce those issues in literature apparently belong to “science fiction, imagining the social innovations emerging from the technology of climate change” or to the thriller genre, “which pointedly weigh risks to governments, bureaucratic agencies, corporations and the public” (Trexler 146-147). Trexler’s ideas are based on the Actor-Network Theory.<sup>9</sup> To sum it up, this theory suggests that there are human and non-human entities, called “actants,” that interact with one another within “webs” or “actor-networks.” This theory assists us in seeing how a process happens. Trexler argues that all the “actants” that are involved in climate change cannot plausibly be encompassed in a realist novel. According to Trexler, “climate change is [...] a complex network of things and effects” (15), and “the most successful climate novels highlight objects and networks and more beyond the confines of traditional realism” (De Bruyn 955). For Trexler then, realism fails to depict these networks because to him realism is limited and climate change “is too big for realist fiction” (De Bruyn 956).

---

<sup>9</sup> Derived from the work of Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, and John Law, a group of sociologists that elaborated this notion that has the purpose of “treat[ing] everything in the social and natural worlds as the continuously generated effect of webs of relations within which they are located. It assumes that nothing has reality or form outside the enactment of those relations” (Law 141).

Ben de Bruyn takes the opposite stance. He argues that Trexler's ideas have their limitations, "both because realism is more complex than Trexler suggests and because the nonhuman networks he highlights fail to take center stage in his own readings" (956). Hence, a novel like *10:04* seems to undermine Trexler's argument by clearly exposing more-than-human networks and things, despite not being a work of science fiction or a thriller. As a matter of fact, "this 'realist' novel is capable of painting a remarkably broad canvas, clearly explor[ing] more than human networks" (De Bruyn 957). For example, in *10:04*, the narrator talks candidly about money. He mentions the price of commodities and renders explicit the "invisible web of connection that is the market" (De Bruyn 957). Things have a price: *The New Yorker* pays "approximately eight thousand dollars" (56) for the story, the agent thinks that the novel could get the narrator "a strong six-figure' advance" (4), the meal he pays for in Marfa is "at least a thousand dollars" (153). Furthermore, the fertility treatments cost about "five thousand a pop" or "the annual pro capita gross national income of China at the time of ejaculation" (93). Ultimately, he also prints "fifty hardcovers with full-color images" of the book about dinosaurs he co-authored with Roberto, paying about forty dollars per volume, for a total of two thousand dollars (220). All this talking about money in the logic of the capitalist market culminates during the description of the dinner with the agent, in which "a picture of the global network [...] converges on his plate" (De Bruyn 957):

After my agent's percentage and taxes (including New York City taxes, she had reminded me), I would clear something like two hundred and seventy thousand dollars. Or Fifty-four IUIs. Or around four Hummer H2 SUVs. Or the two first editions on the market of *Leaves of Grass*. Or about twenty-five years of a Mexican migrant's labor, seven of Alex's in her current job. Or my rent, if I had rent control, for eleven years. Or thirty-six hundred flights of bluefin, assuming the species held. I swallowed and the majesty and murderous stupidity of it was all about me, coursing through me: the rhythm of artisanal Portuguese octopus fisheries coordinated with the rhythm of laborers' migration and the rise and fall of art commodities and tradable futures in the dark galleries outside the restaurant and the mercury and radiation levels of the sashimi

and the chests of the beautiful people in the restaurant—coordinated, or so it appeared, by money. One big joke cycle. One big totaled prosody (155-156).

This passage shows how the narrator is deeply connected to this network of the market and that he is both aware and critical of it. Money seems to put everything on the same level: future books, cars, old books, Mexican workers, American workers, rent, tuna, and octopuses. Furthermore, the “actants” involved in this comparison become “comparable and interchangeable, as expressed by the repetition of the ‘or,’ or by the fact that such commodities travel across the globe, from Portugal and Japan to New York” and they conceal “labor migrations” and “dangerous radiations levels” (De Bruyn 958). This excerpt contains and also puts together many narrative threads of the novel. It evokes the fertility treatments the narrator undergoes with Alex (“44 IUIs”), the role of Whitman (“the two first editions on the market of *Leaves of Grass*”), the issue of immigration and labor of the undocumented (“twenty-five years of a Mexican migrant’s labor”) and the preoccupation with catastrophes (“the mercury and radiation levels of the sashimi”). All of this is depicted and is “caught” in the web of the global market – just as octopuses and tuna are caught by the net of the fisherman. What brings everything together, however, is not only the book’s story but the narrator himself. As a matter of fact, “while eating octopuses, he participates in this strangely coordinated rhythm and feels the lines of the capitalist system coursing through his veins. Ingesting its potentially toxic, uncannily active commodities, he is the global market made flesh” (De Bruyn 958). The narrator knows that and also Lerner knows that. This passage also deals directly with matters of hypocrisy, the same hypocrisy the narrator condemns Whitman for at the beginning of Part 4. Yet, as he does with Whitman, he does the same with himself: he accepts the contradictions inherent in his privileged position and he decides to write from that position. In this sense, it is worth reporting what Lerner said about writing *10:04*,

I can see why, if I, the historical person, choose to write a book that’s set in Brooklyn and talks about book advances and eating bluefin tuna or whatever, that it’s just

automatically in the category of the self-absorbed, [...]. The book wants to acknowledge all of that as an attempt to see what spaces for healing can exist, as opposed to the model of fiction that's like 'The way I deal with the political is that I pretend to have access to the mind of a nine-year-old boy in Sudan' – instead of evading the material conditions of the book. (Witt n.p.)

Hence, Lerner wants to portray this situation of privilege and from this very individualized situation of privilege, he wants to find “spaces for healing;” he wants to deal with the political by criticizing the very system of which he is also part and product of.

Another scene that shows this system of privileges the narrator and Lerner are both parts of, but also tries to find “what spaces of healing can exist” within the capitalist world we live in, is the scene involving instant coffee. Before the first storm, the first impending natural disaster mentioned, the narrator and his friend Alex go to Whole Foods – a supermarket which is dubbed “America’s Healthiest” – to stock up for the coming days in which they expect to be without water or electricity. In the supermarket, usually full of a variety of goods, the shelves are almost empty: “The relative scarcity was strange to behold: in what were typically bright aisles of superabundance, there were now large empty spaces, especially among prepackaged staples;” the things left on the shelves appear to the narrator as “a little changed, a little charged” (18). What draws his attention the most is a can of instant coffee, an essential item on Alex’s list and the only thing they found in the near-empty supermarket:

Finally I found something on the list, something vital: instant coffee. I held the red plastic container, one of the last three on the shelf, held it like the marvel that it was: the seeds inside the purple fruits of coffee plants had been harvested on Andean slopes and roasted and ground and soaked and then dehydrated at a factory in Medellín and vacuum-sealed and flown to JFK and then driven upstate in bulk to Pearl River for repackaging and then transported back by truck to the store where I now stood reading the label. It was as if the social relations that produced the object in my hand began to glow within it as they were threatened, stirred inside their packaging, lending it a certain aura—the majesty and murderous stupidity of that organization of time and space and

fuel and labor becoming visible in the commodity itself now that planes were grounded and the highways were starting to close.

*Everything will be as it is now, just a little different*—nothing in me or the store had changed, except maybe my aorta, but, as the eye drew near, what normally felt like the only possible world became one among many, its meaning everywhere up for grabs, however briefly—in the passing commons of a train, in a container of tasteless coffee. (19)

It is the first time in the book itself, not including the epigraph, that we encounter the phrase “Everything will be as it is now, just a little different,” which works also as a refrain as we have already seen for “unseasonably warm.” The situation that precedes this coming, apocalyptic storm allows the narrator to see things under a different light, to see glimpses of this world to come. For example, he also writes that in the supermarket, “shoppers [...] seemed unusually polite and buoyant, despite the presence of police near the registers” (18), perhaps to suggest that in moments of imminent catastrophe, people feel more connected with one another. But it is in the can of instant coffee which all of this converges. As a matter of fact, what seems to be a trivial object with no meaning whatsoever, becomes something that creates a network of different people, those who contributed to the creation and transportation of that coffee and that gave the can “a certain aura.” It is useful here to take a look at the parable of the world to come, that Lerner, in the acknowledgment section of the book, says he derived from philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s *The Coming Community*. In this book, Agamben includes this parable and says it is attributed to Walter Benjamin. The parable is inserted in a chapter of the book called “Halos.” Halo and aura are very similar terms, oftentimes used interchangeably, but halos – which can also be called aureoles – have a more definite delimitation. In talking about them and about the fact that in the world to come everything will be as it is now, just a little different, Agamben argues, drawing from Saint Thomas, that when a Saint has reached perfection, meaning the beatitude and the entrance to Heaven, to the Absolute, he does not need anything more. However, a halo is “a supplement added to



perfection – something like the vibration of that which is perfect, the glow at its edges” (Agamben 55). In this sense, if as the parable says the world to come is exactly like ours, we still need something that helps us to recognize *when* it will arrive. Even though the halo and the aura are not the same, they convey a similar meaning. The halo and the aura are connected to the realm of possibility, of the possible worlds which function as an alternative to the world we live in now. Thus,

This imperceptible trembling of the finite that makes its limits indeterminate and allows it to blend, to make itself whatever, is the tiny displacement that everything must accomplish in the messianic world. Its beatitude is that of a potentiality that comes only after the act, of matter that does not remain beneath the form, but surrounds it with a halo. (Agamben 57)

The world “trembling” is similar to the word “flickering” that the narrator uses very often in the book to describe the situation of being between two times (67), temporalities (21) or genres (194). The trembling and the flickering associated with the halo and the aura provide a connection between two things: Earth and Heaven, this world and the world to come, the past and the present, but also fiction and non-fiction. Thus, the aura functions as a glimpse of the world to come, but it is never fully realized, as the scene shows, it is just a brief moment that does not last. However, it provides the possibility that this world is not the only possible, but “one among many.” The coming storm seems then to suggest that “the omnipresent reality of capitalism may become a memory soon” because it “expose[s] the fragility of the system” (De Bruyn 958), in the sense that everything that we take for granted every day of our lives is questioned in moments of difficulty.

If on the one hand, we have a glimpse of possibility, on the other we have also a depiction of the “murderous stupidity” of capitalism. The opposition is between the “majesty” of the social relations involved in the creation of the can of instant coffee and the “murderous stupidity” of the system that allows this kind of production. This stupidity becomes “visible in

the commodity itself now that planes were grounded and the highways were starting to close” (19). The word “grounded,” assumes a twofold meaning. It is a word that commonly refers to coffee, in the sense that coffee beans become powder – thus, another passage of the commodity’s travel from South America to North America – and here in this situation instead, the word refers to planes, that are grounded, meaning that they cannot fly. Now that the commodity cannot travel because of a coming natural disaster, the inherent contradictions of the coffee surface. Thus, as in the passage of the dinner aforementioned, what is conveyed here is an ambivalent stance towards matters of capitalism and the market, in which people are connected, but through labor and sometimes pointless modes of transportation – for instance, the coffee arrives in New York City, then goes upstate for repackaging and then goes back to the city. This connects also to the fact that one cannot solely depend on oneself, since even if you cook, as the narrator says, the ingredients are “grown and picked and packaged and transported by others in a system of great majesty and murderous stupidity” (47). Again, the phrase recurs. The can of instant coffee is then remembered by the narrator in another scene when he is visiting Alena’s “Institute for Totaled Art.” He is holding a “damaged” photograph of Cartier-Bresson which does not look damaged at all, deemed valueless by the art world for reasons not exactly clear, an object which is just the same, but a little different, an object that – like the can of coffee during the night of the storm – has been liberated from this world and from the logic of the market. The narrator asks, “What was the world for that liberation? *Apocalypse? Utopia?*” (133). The can of coffee, however, maintains a price and cannot escape the logic of the market, also because the storm “had been downgraded before reaching landfall” (23). Everything that happened before the storm is “retrospectively erased” and the world comes back to how it was before the storm, because disaster, for the moment, is avoided, and the can loses the power that had been given to it by the impending apocalypse. On the other hand, the damaged-but-intact artworks like the Cartier-Bresson are completely freed from the

market, since their value has changed for good, no matter what happens in nature; this does not affect them like it affects the can of coffee. In this sense, it is more a matter of utopia than of apocalypse if we consider these specific works of art. We can compare this scene of the coffee to another scene regarding another commodity, this time a more essential one: water. Towards the end of the book, when the narrator and Alex are walking back to Brooklyn from Manhattan after Sandy has struck – this time causing much more damage and making also taxis disappear from the streets – he buys a bottle of water from a bodega for 10 dollars, which brings him to notice that “prices rise in the dark” (237). Even though De Bruyn argues that this scene “replays the coffee jar scene” (959), here the bottle does not have an aura, does not provide any glimpse of the world to come and its price is specified, unlike the price of the coffee in the former scene. In light of this, the latter scene has “a more ominous tone, suggesting that, instead of disappearing, capitalism may simply become more unpredictable, expensive, violent” (De Bruyn 959).

Nevertheless, the book ends on a positive note. The only thing that escapes the logic of capitalism is the work of art “freed” from the market, a work which is just the same, but a little different, which has a flickering aura. The book the narrator wants to write at the beginning, the book about forging the correspondence of a young author, becomes a book that transcends fraudulence and moves towards sincerity and collectivity, a work of the Anthropocene, dealing with the impact of man on nature and with the consequences of this impact. The novel is transformed from a book about selling to a book about something that goes in the opposite direction. Capitalism seems inescapable, to quote Frederic Jameson, “Someone once said it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism,” (76) but one must keep trying to do that, imagine possible alternatives to this unfair system. For example, in a scene in which the narrator is contemplating the Manhattan skyline, which can be considered one of the “heart” of capitalism he ponders,

Bundled debt, trace amounts of antidepressants in the municipal water, the vast arterial network of traffic, changing weather patterns of increasing severity—whenever I looked at lower Manhattan from Whitman’s side of the river I resolved to become one of the artists who momentarily made bad forms of collectivity figures of its possibility, a proprioceptive flicker in advance of the communal body. (108-109)

What the narrator is here suggesting, as noted by Drew Welles on *Hazlitt* is that “if our communal work can warm the planet and create financial instruments of almost unbelievable complexity, surely it can also develop alternatives” (n.p.). Realizing this, humankind would be able to overcome issues of global warming and climate change, and artists must keep providing “forms of collectivity” – even if “bad” – to maintain intact the possibility that something will change and must change. With *10:04*, Lerner seems to suggest that, in order to avoid ending up like dinosaurs, we must point towards “a communal body” which can bring mankind to survive the Anthropocene.

## Final Considerations

Over the course of my analysis, it has been shown how and why author Ben Lerner can be considered one of the most interesting writers of his generation. Coming from poetry, he has been able to apply his competent use of language to prose, in order to produce hybrid works of art that deal with preoccupations regarding what it means to be an artist at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the first chapter, I have tried to provide a brief taxonomy of American contemporary fiction, in which I included Lerner's work. Starting from Postmodernism, I have moved to the works of critics that identify writers at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as writers of the New Sincerity or Post-Postmodernism. Then, I have shown how critics such as Nicholas Dames and Mitchell Huels connect older writers, most of them born in the sixties, with younger writers born in the seventies and the eighties under the umbrella terms of "Theory Generation" or "Post-Theory Theory Novelists." Then, I have shown how these younger writers can be considered part, as critic M.H. Miller has argued, of a category that he calls "Post-Fiction" writers.

In the second chapter, I have analyzed Lerner's first novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station*. Through the narrator Adam Gordon, a young, naïve, and self-centered narrator, Lerner has shown his concern for both aesthetics and political matters, dealing with the situation of the American abroad after 9/11. Writing under the guise of irony, Adam deals with many things, particularly aesthetic ideas about poetry influenced by the writings of critic Allen Grossman and his notion of "the echo of poetic possibility," the poems of John Ashbery, the relationship between poetry and politics and, eventually, with the impossibility of applying aesthetic principles to everyday life and situations. All of this brings Adam to live situations of displacement, marked by his being on a threshold: between facts and fiction, between poetry and politics, between Spain and the United States. The only resolution to these conflicts seems

to be the acceptance of this situation of liminality, from which he produced a work of art that is the novel we have just read.

On the other hand, *10:04* shows a more mature narrator that directly faces a world which seems to be on the brink of a catastrophe. In the third chapter, I have shown how this book takes on different themes that would have never interested Adam Gordon, such as desire of communion with other people, capitalism, and global warming. The narrator of *10:04* is older, more mature than Adam, and seems to be more interested in connecting, or at least in trying to connect, with other people. In the persistent metaphor of the octopus, in the engagement with Whitman's poetry and in the blurring between fiction and facts that is taken up a notch, *10:04* seems to perform a movement from a poetics of irony to one of sincerity, providing a much more honest account of what it means to be an artist in a world threatened by global warming and the catastrophes that this brings with it.

In 2011, Tao Lin argued that "each book by Ben [Lerner] seems to be edited with the knowledge of some future position (like how one edits previous pages of a book after completing the final pages, then edits the final pages again, then the previous pages again, etc.), as if Ben's oeuvre were a single work that is already completed and is being released in parts" (n.p.). While waiting for the release of the next installation, I hope I have succeeded in showing how Lerner's oeuvre, even though limited to just two novels and three books of poetry, attempts to create a "portrait of the artist as a young man," to paraphrase Joyce's homonymous novel, at the turn of the millennium.

## Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Coming Community*. Translated by Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. Print.
- Arrival*. Directed by Denis Villeneuve, performances by Amy Adams, Jeremy Renner, Forest Whitaker, Warner Bros., 2016.
- Ashbery, John. "The Impossible." *Poetry*. 90.4 (1957): 250-254. Print.
- Ashbery, John. *Collected Poems 1956-1987*. New York: The Library of America, 2008. Print.
- Ashbery, John. *Other Traditions*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000. Print.
- Back to the Future*. Directed by Robert Zemeckis, performances by Michael J. Fox, Christopher Lloyd, Universal Pictures, 1985.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Collected Fictions*. Translated by Andrew Hurley. New York: Penguin Books, 1999. Print.
- Borges, Mariana. "A misunderstanding: trauma and terrorism in the '9/11 fiction.'" *TRANS-*. 15 (2013): 1-12. Print.
- Caracciolo, Marco. *The Experientiality of Narrative*. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2014. Print.
- Chilewich, Aron Rafael. "The Early Works of Ben Lerner." Dissertation, Wesleyan University, 2014.
- Clune, Michael. "'Whatever Charms is Alien:' John Ashbery's Everything." *Criticism*. 50.3 (2008): 447-470. Print.
- . *Writing Against Time*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013. Print.
- Cusset, Catherine. "The Limits of Autofiction." Conference Presentation. *Autofiction: Literature in France Today*. United States, New York. 20 Apr. 2012. Web. 13 May 2018. <http://www.catherinecusset.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/THE-LIMITS-OF-AUTOFICTION.pdf>
- Dames, Nicholas. "The Theory Generation." *N+1 Magazine*. Summer 2012. Web 12 Jun. 2018. <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-14/reviews/the-theory-generation/>
- De Bruyn, Ben. "Realism 4°. Objects, Weather and Infrastructure in Ben Lerner's *10:04*." *Textual Practice* 31.5 (2017): 951-971. Print.
- Dickinson, Emily. *Tutte le poesie*. Milano: Mondadori, 1997. Print.
- Domestico, Anthony. "Life After Theory." *Boston Review*. 2 Sep. 2014. Web 10 May 2018. <http://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/anthony-domestico-ben-lerner-atocha-1004>

- Dyer, Geoff. "Leaving the Atocha Station by Ben Lerner – Review." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media Limited, 5 Jul. 2012. Web. 30 Jul. 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jul/05/leaving-atocha-station-ben-lerner>
- Edwards, Lucy E. "What Is the Anthropocene?" *EOS: Earth & Space Science News*. 30 Nov. 2015. Web 10 May 2018. <https://eos.org/opinions/what-is-the-anthropocene>
- Evans, Tom. "Ben Lerner, 10:04 & The Death Of 'Silence.'" *The Quietus*. 22 Feb. 2015. Web. 10 May 2018. <http://thequietus.com/articles/17286-ben-lerner-1004-silence-art-sontag>
- Ferguson, Margaret, et al. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry: Fifth Edition*. New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005. Print.
- Ferreira-Meyers, Karen. "Autofiction: 'imaginaire' and reality, an interesting mix leading to the illusion of a genre?" *Phantasma*. Web. 14 May 2018. <http://phantasma.lett.ubbcluj.ro/?p=4365>
- García Lorca, Federico. *Selected Poems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Print.
- Garner, Dwight. "With Storms Outside, Inner Conflicts Swirl." *The New York Times*. 2 Sep. 2014. Web. 16 May 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/03/books/in-ben-lerners-1004-new-york-is-a-character.html>
- Gosmann, Uta. *Poetic Memory: Poetic Memory: The Forgotten Self in Plath, Howe, Hinsey, and Glück*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012. Print.
- Grossman, Allen. *The Long Schoolroom: Lessons in the Bitter Logic of the Poetic Principle*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997. Print.
- Heti, Sheila. "I hadn't even seen the Alhambra." *London Review of Books*. 30 Aug. 2012. Web. 26 Apr. 2018. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n16/sheila-heti/i-hadnt-even-seen-the-alhambra>
- Huels, Mitchum. "The Post-Theory Theory Novel." *Contemporary Literature*. 56.2 (2015): 280-310. Print
- Irr, Caren. "Toward the World Novel: Genre Shifts in Twenty-First-Century Expatriate Fiction." *American Literary History*. 23.3 (2011): 660–679. Print.
- Jakobson, Roman. "The Dominant." *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*. Eds. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska. Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1978. 82-7. Print.
- James, Henry. *The Portrait of a Lady*. London: Collector's Library, 2004. Print.
- Jameson, Frederic. "Future City." *New Left Review*. 21 (2003): 65-79. Print.
- Katz, Daniel. "'I did not walk here all the way from prose': Ben Lerner's virtual poetics." *Textual Practice*. 31.2 (2017): 315-337. Print.



- Kelly, Adam. "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction." *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*. Ed. David Hering. Austin, TX: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010. 131-146. Print.
- Killingsworth, Silvia. "Why Not Eat Octopus?" *The New Yorker*. 3 Oct. 2014. Web 10 May 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/eating-octopus>
- Lapidos, Juliet. "When Are Metafictional Games a Mask for Laziness?" *The New Republic*. 26 Aug. 2014. Web 13 May. 2018. <https://newrepublic.com/article/119005/ben-lerners-1004-review-repetition-and-autobiography-fiction>
- Law, John. "Actor-Network Theory and Material Semiotics." *The New Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*. Ed. Bryan S. Turner. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008. 141-158. Print.
- Lerner, Ben. *10:04*. New York: Picador, 2014. Print
- . *Leaving the Atocha Station*. London: Granta Books, 2013. Print.
- . *No Art: Poems*. London: Granta Books, 2016. Print.
- . *The Hatred of Poetry*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2016. Print.
- . "'You're a poet; don't you hate most poems?'" Interview by Tao Lin. *The Believer*. 13 Aug. 2011. Web. 26 Apr. 2018. [https://www.believermag.com/exclusives/?read=interview\\_lerner](https://www.believermag.com/exclusives/?read=interview_lerner)
- . "An interview with Ben Lerner." Interview by Gayle Rogers. *Contemporary Literature*. 54.2 (2013): 219-238. Print.
- . "Ben Lerner on why so many people (rightfully) hate poetry." Interview by Cody Delistraty. *Literary Hub*. 14 Jul. 2016. Web. 26 Apr. 2018. <https://lithub.com/ben-lerner-on-why-so-many-people-rightfully-hate-poetry/>
- . "Ben Lerner." Interview by Adam Fitzgerald. *BOMB Magazine*. 19 Sep. 2011. Web. 30 Jul. 2017. <http://bombmagazine.org/article/6081/ben-lerner>
- . "Ben Lerner." Interview by Christopher Bollen. *Interview Magazine*. 4 Sep. 2014. Web 10 May 2018. <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/ben-lerner>
- . "Ben Lerner." Interview by Tao Lin. *The Believer*. Sep. 2014. Web 13 May 2018. [https://www.believermag.com/exclusives/?read=interview\\_lerner\\_2](https://www.believermag.com/exclusives/?read=interview_lerner_2)
- . "Ben Lerner on *10:04*, His Second Hall-of-Mirrors Semi-Memoir." *Vulture*. 28 Aug. 2014. Web 11 Jun. 2018. <http://www.vulture.com/2014/08/ben-lerner-interview-1004.html>
- . "Interview with Ben Lerner, author of *Leaving the Atocha Station*." Interview by Teddy Wayne. *The Huffington Post*. 25 Aug. 2011. Web. 26 Apr. 2018. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/teddy-wayne/interview-with-ben-lerner\\_b\\_935171.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/teddy-wayne/interview-with-ben-lerner_b_935171.html)

- . “People say, ‘Oh, here’s another Brooklyn novel by a guy with glasses.’” Interview by Emily Witt. *The Guardian*. 3 Jan. 2015. Web 10 May 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/03/ben-lerner-1004-novel-books-interview>
- . “The Actual World.” *Frieze*. 16 Jun. 2013. Web 12 Jun. 2018. <https://frieze.com/article/actual-world>
- . “The Future Continuous: Ashbery’s Lyric Mediacy.” *Boundary 2*. 37.1 (2010): 201-213. Print.
- . “Time Is A Flat Circle: Ben Lerner Interviewed.” Interview by Karl Smith. *The Quietus*. 8 Feb. 2015. Web 10 May 2018. <http://thequietus.com/articles/17190-ben-lerner-interview-1004-leaving-atocha-station-poetry-time-knausgaard>
- Leyboldt, Günter. “Knausgaard in America: Literary Prestige and Charismatic Trust.” *Critical Quarterly*. 59.3 (2017): 55-69. Print.
- Leyshon, Cressida. “This Week in Fiction: Ben Lerner.” *The New Yorker*. 10 Jun. 2012. Web 10 May 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/this-week-in-fiction-ben-lerner>
- Longenbach, James. *Modern Poetry After Modernism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. Print.
- Lorentzen, Christian. “Considering the Novel in the Age of Obama.” *Vulture*. 11 Jan. 2017. Web. 12 Jun. 2018. <http://www.vulture.com/2017/01/considering-the-novel-in-the-age-of-obama.html>
- . “How ‘Auto’ is ‘Autofiction?’” *Vulture*. 11 May 2018. Web. 12 May 2018. <http://www.vulture.com/2018/05/how-auto-is-autofiction.html>
- MacLaughlin, Sam. “Spanish Inquisition.” *N+1 Magazine*. 17 Feb. 2012. Web. 26 Apr. 2018. <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/book-review/spanish-inquisition/>
- Mathew, Shaj. “Welcome to Literature’s Duchamp Moment.” *New Republic*, 19 May 2015. Web. 24 Mar 2018. <https://newrepublic.com/article/121603/avant-garde-literature-starting-resemble-conceptual-art>
- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York & London: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Max, Jonah. “E-READERS: Ben Lerner, Tao Lin, Karl Ove Knausgaard, and the net-inflected novel.” *The College Hill Independent*. 17 Oct. 2014. Web 10 May 2018. <https://www.theindy.org/417>
- Mazza Galanti, Carlo. “Autofinzioni.” *Minima et Moralia*. 8 Jul. 2010. Web 13 May 2018. <http://www.minimaetmoralia.it/wp/autofinzioni/>
- Miller, M.H. “Book Reviewed: Choire Sicha’s ‘Very Recent History’ and the Rise of Post-Fiction.” *Observer*. 30 Jul. 2013. Web 12 Jun. 2018. <http://observer.com/2013/07/book-reviewed-choire-sichas-very-recent-history-and-the-rise-of-post-fiction/>

- Nelles, Drew. "Ben Lerner's *10:04* - A novel that explores the tensions between reality and fiction." *The Globe and the Mail*. 12 Sep. 2014. Web 12 May 2018. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/book-reviews/ben-lerners-1004---a-novel-that-explores-the-tensions-between-reality-and-fiction/article20577321/>
- . "How to Feel About the End of the World." *Hazlitt*. 15 Oct. 2014. Web 13 May 2018. <https://hazlitt.net/feature/how-feel-about-end-world>
- Nelson, Maggie. "Slipping the Surly Bonds of Earth: On Ben Lerner's Latest." *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. 24 Aug. 2014. Web 10 May 2018. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/95063/>
- Preston, Alex. "*10:04* by Ben Lerner review – a great writer, a great novel." *The Guardian*. 4 Jan. 2015. Web 10 May 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/04/10-04-review-ben-lerner-great-writer>
- Roth, Gabriel. "Interested in the Octopuses." *Slate*. 8 Sep. 2014. Web 16 May 2018. [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2014/09/ben\\_lerner\\_s\\_novel\\_10\\_04\\_review\\_e\\_d.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2014/09/ben_lerner_s_novel_10_04_review_e_d.html)
- Schwalm, Helga. "Autobiography." *The Living Handbook of Narratology*. Ed. Hühn, Peter et al. Hamburg: Hamburg University. 11 Apr. 2014. Web 13 May 2018. <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/autobiography>
- Shields, David. *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2010. Print.
- Shklovsky, Viktor. "Art as Device." *Theory of Prose*. Translated by Benjamin Sher. London: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990. 1-14. Print.
- Smith, Zadie. "Two Directions for the Novel." *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2009. 39-48. Print.
- Sniderman, Alisa. "Ben Lerner's *10:04*." *The Last Magazine*. 27 Aug. 2014. Web 11 Jun. 2018. <https://thelast-magazine.com/ben-lerner-new-novel-1004/>
- Sturgeon, Jonathon. "2014: The Death of the Postmodern Novel and the Rise of Autofiction." *Flavorwire*. 31 Dec. 2014. Web 11 Jun. 2018. <http://flavorwire.com/496570/2014-the-death-of-the-postmodern-novel-and-the-rise-of-autofiction>
- Temple, Emily. "Ben Lerner's '10:04' Is a Meta-Fictional Masterpiece That Illuminates How Our Minds Work." *Flavorwire*. 4 Sep. 2014. Web 10 May 2018. <http://flavorwire.com/475588/ben-lerners-1004-is-a-meta-fictional-masterpiece-that-illuminates-how-our-minds-work>
- The Paris Review. "Ben Lerner's First Time." *Youtube*, 16 Feb. 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZW49zCMDy8>
- Trexler, Adam. *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015. E-book.

- Velsor, Mose (Walt Whitman). "Manly Health and Training, With Off-Hand Hints Toward Their Conditions," ed. Zachary Turpin. *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 33 (2016): 184-310. Print.
- Wallace, David Foster. *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*. New York: Back Bay Books, 1996. Print.
- Walsh, Roger, and Frances Vaughan. "On transpersonal definitions." *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*. 25 (1993): 199-207. Print.
- Whitman, Walt. *Poetry and Prose*. New York: The Library of America, 1982. Print.
- Wikipedia contributors. "Proprioception." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 6 Apr. 2018. Web. 16 May 2018. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proprioception>