

The Lights, Ben Lerner. Farrar, Straus & Giroux

Ben Lerner's greatest strength is a subtle gift for comedy. Like Stanley Cavell, he takes eccentric perspectives and remains between, refusing to validate sides. "Sides" of what? Sides of nothing but doors to still another consideration. There is no debate. Lerner winds through his material without expecting, though wishing for, a goal, a conclusion, a solution. The eccentricity of it, the ever so masterful muting of the pathos of it, is all. That sounds limiting, and is, but the comic finesse and impudence of it belong to post-modernism in the way that "sublime insolence," in Jed Rasula's phrase, belongs to modernism.

I would call Lerner's moves in his first three poetry books and again in the new book, *The Lights*, inspired strategy. His strategies keep the reader alert and subordinate, even as, unforced, they run on silent wheels. "Turn[s] of phase" are as likely as turns of phrase. No "world" is more than a spider web broken by one's face. The insufficiency-plot – the post-modern comedy show when it isn't the postmodern display of the malady of being – is a lonely skid.

For me, therefore, the interest of Lerner's career now is how far he may go in fictionalizing empathy, a non-comic quality that he introduces in *The Lights*. How, if at all, will the comedy that pushes others away and the empathy that holds them close be mutually adjusted?

The "lights" announced by the title of the new collection of diverse, often delicious pieces of verse and prose include UFOs: "Slow-moving objects flying in in groups / Lights in the trees." Here the comedy is a touch more understated than it usually is. Indeed, comedy and empathy are mixed together. The "he" in the following lines was a friend, Bobby, who was mourning his mother. "Every few hours he would be in tears. And I would hold him . . . I have learned to hold / the back of the head when we embrace, it adds / a sense and also slows it down like":

If they do make contact and the dead missed it
my mom missed it, he said, a break
in all human understanding she wasn't here for and I
was like: one, they might have ways
of ministering to the dead and two
and two, there are deep resources in the culture for trying to
understand . . .

No way a human pilot could
unless the outer shell was a cavity filled with gas.

The lights in an instant classic, the short story "The Curtain," are down to earth and the narrating voice, identified as "Ben's," is much closer to Lerner's own. Here, "Ben" and his friend John overhear two college-age girls talking in a train. Their subject is the curtain of patches that Siberian prisoners make to put on a play in Dostoyevsky's *The House of the Dead*, using the convicts' shirts, bandages, linen, writing paper, and so on. Now, Lerner is a sly one. He does not emphasize associations. But the word "patches" is there to light up the book and to nudge us to see that patches is a theme that belongs to him, his mind inhabits it, it inhabits his mind. Let it be a figure for the variety of genres in *The Lights* and, even more, all his writings put together, and for his make-shift "phases" as an author, the changes in his uncommitted constructions of things, his worlds, none of which stick. He has no overarching theme, no guiding, grinding obsession, no ideology, no diseased imagination in search of a cure. No "vision," in short. His ambivalent wanting of one is what makes him an exemplary writer of his generation, and helps to explain, just a little, his huge following.

Regardless, in *The Lights* he has arrived at artistic maturity and without breaking his confinement to patches, to which he is clearly attached and by which he is circumscribed.

To go further with "The Curtain." Whereas the book's title poem is a hilarious skit mournful in tone, the prose in "the Curtain" is that of conventional monological narrative until it isn't, as it succumbs to Lerner's hardly suppressible or surpassable gift for hijinks. The turn comes when the two college-girls manifest as two skin heads who accost the men on their way to Ben's apartment. But, wait, they are also the girls:

At that point I realized these two boys were . . . the two girls who had been talking about Dostoyevsky on the train, They must have followed us, they must have been following us our whole lives . . . And they said, although not in words, we have come to relieve him [John] of his duffle [filled with gold bars: so much for sober realism] to end one world so you can start another. Because a world ends every few seconds and must be rebuilt, worlds end and are rebuilt, a rocking motion.

Earlier in the three-and-a-half page story (things move fast here), "Ben" had said, "Shades and impurities that let us hold our shapes are minimum conditions for a world, but many worlds are brief, a pulse moving through a medium, many worlds collide and recombine as you walk through them which feel like a succession of webs on the face: splash, splash, splash. . . ." The eruption of this terrifyingly sped-up recall of the *waves on waves unrolling ever* philosophy is startling and wonderfully unexpected (a *big view*), comprehensive in its way, a Prospero way. Lerner's work, again except for his novels, moves from brief world to brief world, sometimes more than once in a short poem. For example, a recital of regrets in the first book, *The Lichtenberg Figures* (2004), recognizes that our world has not been sufficiently founded, and no activity is pure and satisfying:

We must retract our offerings, burnt as they are.
We must recall our lines of verse like faulty tires.
We must flay the curatoriat, invest our sackcloth

The lines are fashioned to be funny, and are, but any standup comic can tell you that their comic flashes come from personal insecurities. Potentially more damaging, coming from a poet, is the conclusion that "poetry has yet to emerge." Only images worm up, and not just for "Ben." The image: "an anecdote / in the mouth of a stillborn."

I am following a trail here: following Ben and John to Ben's place, but stopping along the way to add to the picture of Ben's sense of his personal insufficiency in an inadequate, indeed ungrounded, world, one that has failed to calm itself into a single thing that lasts for more than a day, a few breaths. The next window into personal inadequacy in *The Lights* is the first-rate prose poem "The Stone." Here the felt problem is that the speaker can talk but can't sing. Whitman could convey talk right over into speech-song, like assisting a big dog into the back of an SUV, but nowadays a "people's voice" no longer speaks through us, perhaps can't (a grave pity, since "the people are back-formed from their singing, which socializes feeling, expands the domain of the feelable." Nor can the speaker of the poem be lyrical, lose himself in song, that still prestigious alternative to prose. Playing off of Wallace Stevens' "Order at Key West," Lerner's speaker says that "the goal of song is to liquify things, the singer most of all. When she sings, she can't pull the song back out, and when she flees, she leaves behind parts of her digestive tract, muscles, nerves. . . ." The grotesque comedy helps soothe his inability to self-liquify. Comedy, give me your arm.

That Lerner can't liquify (to risk a generalization) leaves him with . . . himself, whom he regards not as a marvelous creator but as a rather sorry being. He writes to forget self-doubt, but until *The Lights* and in particular "The Dark Threw Patches Down Upon Me, Also," empathy, one of the means of escaping from mere self, has not emerged. This is why "The Curtain" is important. John has lost his job, he and Cora have broken up "over the kid question," and his recent sound installations "are bullshit." He's "a mess," and on the walk to Ben's apartment he even begins to lose his shape. Ben says, "I was basically dragging him back to the city so I could watch him." That's more than decency; that's caring, with a component of empathy.

What does Ben need? To give or to receive empathy? Well, in the case of empathy, the giver is also the receiver; the emotion includes both. He thinks that his need is for (as an example) city lights: "I personally need cities at night." The transpersonal character of the radiant spots, the inference of others sharing the night, would be distractions from, and an objection to, remaining in oneself like a heavy object that can't easily be altered. But Ben *will* care. When John complains of "this sense of being a burden on my friends, on you and Ben," the latter, informed by the immense patchwork of cities (the other as multitude, a Whitmanic specialty), and by impurities, says, "I'm listening now, John, Josh, Josiah, James. Tell me what you need."

Empathy, lyricism, nursing, acting as a friend's therapist, these are all passing experiences. A sense of not doing and being enough may persist. That's life. But comedy is an exception. It's active, not passive, pointing its sword, not unprotestingly accepting. In the Lerner of *The Lights*, you have it all: love and empathy, newly emerged; a poet's genius for metaphor; and, above all, the strategy of comedy.

Love for the republic was the shining quality in Lerner's hero, the everyman hero, Walt Whitman. In a residence in Marfa, Texas, Lerner, in "The Dark Threw Down," the most autobiographical of the poems (it was in fact included in his second work of "auto-fiction" after first being published in *Lana Turner*), looks across the country to Brooklyn, a home he has in common with Whitman. He's reading the Civil War book, *Specimen Days* – the prose Whitman, the nurse Whitman. What love poured out of the poet! He felt "no need to contain his love / [even] for the material richness of their dying." His was the "utopian moment loving the smell of shit and blood, brandy / as it trickles through the wound." "Love," a word Lerner was shy of in his earlier books.

Subtly in the course of the long poem and once abruptly ("I deliver money to boys with perforated organs") Lerner as good as becomes Whitman.

as good as becomes the Whitman of *Specimen Days*. And he imagines saying to Whitman and his age, "your president will be shot in a theater, actors will be presidents, the small sums / will grow monstrous as they circulate. . . . I have come from the future to warn you." So, a fantasy of connecting with Whitman by forgetting himself and speaking to the people: "only when empty can we imagine assembling, not as ourselves, but as representatives / of the selves he has asked us to dissolve: / dumb ministers."

The title of the poem in fact comes from Whitman: "The Dark Threw Patches Down Upon Me Also." The dark trees allow moonlight to break through them in patches that fall on anyone who passes. It's equalizing. "Down upon me also." Here patches and democracy, patches and community, patches and fellow-feeling, go together.

The poem is written in blank verse, but if you look at the lines and imagine them as prose, they're prose, prose with flow, the punctuation working against patchiness and frequent stops. Lerner has approached Whitman's lyrical line but omitted the passion, the exuberance. Full-out lyricism may be unattainable for him, or not. Prose, a practical tool of communication, rills along in established grooves, and for Lerner, I imagine, that makes prose difficult to throw off. In the way is his acute rationality, stunning clarity, and extraordinary capacity to soak up a good deal of the great garbage patch of everyday speech, which he processes and renders back in his voices as comedy. Not to mention that he somehow gets hold of knowledge of just about anything you can mention. A social, worldly mentality.

"Can the song be talked into existence I wanted to ask." He comes that close. Writing of Franciscan poverty, Giorgio Agamben says that it is no longer poverty when what is unattainable is no longer regarded as necessary. Lerner's prose itself has become a sufficiency without song, in its intimacy with what it doesn't require. It swims confidently just under the surface of needing to sing. It is not poverty. More would be less.