

Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2011. 181pp. \$15

The remarkable popular and critical success of *Leaving the Atocha Station* owes much to the lyric sensibility that has already won Ben Lerner recognition as a poet. Yet the smooth veneer of the novel's prose covers over a serious formal defect: the protagonist, Adam Gordon, is an unconvincing character, making the novel's world and story unconvincing as well. Though the novel has been understood as a narrative of personal development, the psychological presentation of Gordon does not suggest a maturation arc or even a clear means by which maturation could occur.

Adam Gordon is much like Lerner himself: an intelligent young man from Topeka, Kansas, raised by two eminent psychologists. Like Lerner did, Gordon spends a year in his mid-20s writing poetry in Spain thanks to a prestigious fellowship. The action of the story, confined entirely to the fellowship term, is minimal: like many fellowship recipients, Gordon finds himself unable to work, and spends his time in idleness and frivolous sociality.

Much of Gordon's energy is dedicated to flirtations with two Spanish women, Isabel and Teresa, respectively a language school employee and a translator. He wins their good graces, at first, by the false claim that his mother has died. After being found out in this lie—or strategically confessing to it—he continues to play upon their sympathy by claiming she is seriously ill and much-oppressed by what Gordon calls a “fascist” father figure. Though his behavior around the urbane Teresa is merely selfish and awkward, his treatment of working-class Isabel is emotionally manipulative. In a classically abusive move, one of many, he stages a public humiliation by inviting Isabel to an extremely fancy restaurant, a gesture designed to make her feel uncomfortable and small while appearing to be a token of affection.

This personal drama constitutes the main action of the novel. By the time the 2004 Madrid train bombings interrupt this low-action narration, Gordon has told, by my count, twenty-seven self-serving lies over about 100 pages. As he ponders the attacks, Gordon concludes that he has nothing to say about them, and no personal stake in Spanish affairs. After a disastrous appearance at a conference panel reveals that he has, for a year, neglected the stated purpose of his fellowship, Gordon prepares to return to the US with no lessons learned. He says, “I have never been here” and “I didn't think I'd undergone much change.”

However, though Gordon is an ugly character who exhibits a minimal amount of self-awareness, Lerner works hard to redeem him. Scenes of petty

or callous behavior are followed by moments of lyricism and speculation: an especially egregious lie about his parents is followed by a long riff on Tolstoy, Aristotle, and hash, and then later by a meditation on the nature of translation. Gordon also preempts the reader's condemnation by making abject declarations of his essential worthlessness and vacuity. But these preemptions are finely wrought and emotionally calculating. The novel's fictional world conveniently complies when Gordon needs to be rescued from the reader's judgment. When he insists on the worthlessness of his poetry, another character will immediately say something soothing or complimentary. These set pieces, which form a significant part of the text, alert us to Gordon's intelligence or vulnerability; ambition and endowment are thrust forward when the narrator's actual behavior would compel us to an unfavorable judgment. This misdirection is a form of characterological anachronism; though the book is not composed as a distant retrospective view of youth, Gordon's reflections are far more mature and composed than his age and idleness could justify.

It may be useful to compare Lerner's novel to J. M. Coetzee's *Youth*, a novel whose plot is remarkably similar: a man in his twenties (named John Coetzee) moves to a foreign metropolis to write poetry, but rather than working, finds himself telling lies about family and drifting in and out of morally squalid relationships, clinging to a cherished personal misery and a resolute political detachment. Coetzee's novel, like Lerner's, is an admixture of autobiography and fiction. In both cases, there is a danger that the accomplishment and renown of the author will cause the reader to see the youthful protagonist's behavior as retroactively justified.

Yet *Youth* affords the reader more space to form an independent moral judgment. In part this is because the novel is written in the third person, so that the narration is merely presenting a character, rather than collapsing together character and narrative voice. But more importantly, John Coetzee's thought is directed inward rather than toward the reader or other characters, and is thereby not censored or composed with the aim of achieving some effect. Without the benefit of a sparkling formulation, the poverty of John's beliefs becomes apparent.

Perhaps more importantly, the shape of the narrative allows for growing self-awareness on the part of the protagonist. Though John Coetzee is no artist, he has, by the novel's end, rejected the idea that art retroactively justifies morally dubious behavior, and acknowledges that this behavior has enduring consequences. This new attitude clears the way for Coetzee's overtly moral fiction.

Fiction, of course, does not need to edify in order to succeed, but it must be true according to its own rules. That Gordon is selfish and manipulative

is not, in itself, an argument against the novel. There is a long history of memorably manipulative characters, from Pechorin and Barry Lyndon to Humbert Humbert and Patrick Bateman. The trouble is that Lerner does not successfully establish Gordon's ironic position in the novel. *Leaving the Atocha Station* is essentially false, suggesting through Lerner's writerly skill the existence of an emergent, mature sensibility while offering nothing in the plot itself to indicate that the narrator could plausibly possess or acquire this sensibility.

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Peter O'Leary, *Luminous Epinoia*. New York: The Cultural Society, 2010. 98pp. \$21

Norman Finkelstein, *Inside the Ghost Factory*. East Rockaway, NY: Marsh Hawk Press, 2010. 66pp. \$15

Around the time Peter O'Leary's *Luminous Epinoia* was published, an essay of his called "Apocalypticism: A Way Forward for Poetry" appeared in the pages of this journal. Part memoir, part polemic, part literary appreciation, the essay argued that apocalypse—a sacred expression that can "unbind love from material desire, freeing it to embrace the unknown and the unspeakable"—has been erased from American poetry. In O'Leary's view, neither the old school of the workshop lyric nor the tradition of Language writing supports vatic or visionary poetry. O'Leary's own recent work, along with that of Norman Finkelstein, constitutes a strong argument for the vitality of this project. O'Leary, Finkelstein, and a number of other poets—Pam Rehm, Michael Heller, Harriet Zinnes, and especially Joseph Donahue and Nathaniel Mackey—make formal and conceptual links to this deeply rooted poetic tradition, which extends back through Duncan to Yeats and Blake. In our formally diverse but overwhelmingly secular poetic moment their work represents a true counterculture whose achievement has yet to be fully appreciated.

Luminous Epinoia is a book of many things: surreal fables, reflections on sacred architecture, sermons on the meaning of love in a time of war, and the occasional jab at the policies of the Bush administration. But most of all, it is a book concerned with incarnation. Its title comes from the Apocryphon of John, a second century Gnostic gospel, where the "luminous Epinoia" is a heterodox version of Eve, a physical extension of Adam and a helper who will restore to him the full, creative vision of religious experience. O'Leary's book takes a strong influence from the great Catholic theologian and paleontologist