

N.º 2 septiembre 2016

# POÉTICAS

*Revista de Estudios Literarios*



# POÉTICAS

*Revista de Estudios Literarios*



## ÍNDICE

*Págs.*

### [ESTUDIOS]

Andrew A. Anderson  
DIVÁN DEL TAMARIT 5

Juan José Lanz  
BLAS DE OTERO  
«EN CANTO Y ALMA» 27

Judith Nantell  
THE POETICS OF EPIPHANY... 63

Juan José Rastrollo Torres  
«METROPOLITANO» O LA  
POÉTICA DE CARLOS BARRAL 89

### [ARTÍCULOS]

Juan Esteban Villegas Restrepo  
LA CRÍTICA LITERARIA... 113

Tamar Flores Granados  
LA FIGURA DEL INTELECTUAL... 129

Erin L. McCoy  
UNA NUEVA  
POÉTICA GALLEGA 145

### [ENTREVISTA]

Antonio López Ortega  
CONVERSACIÓN  
CON RAFAEL CADENAS 157

[POEMAS]  
YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA 163

[RESEÑAS]  
Tania Ganitsky  
THE GORGEOUS NOTHINGS 171  
Zachary Rockwell Ludington  
THE HATRED OF POETRY 177

José Andújar Almansa  
UN LECTOR LLAMADO  
FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA 183

Mariela Dreyfus  
RÍO EN BLANCO 189

Normas de publicación /  
Publication guidelines 193

Orden de suscripción 201



S. Lerner, Benjamin

*The Hatred of Poetry*

Farrar, Strauss & Giroux: New York, 2016

## THE HATRED OF POETRY

Zachary Rockwell Ludington

University of Virginia

Ben Lerner's most recent book begins with an uncomfortable assertion: that the general indifference, or even disdain, poetry suffers in contemporary society is a natural consequence of poetry's unresolved history of disappointment. He even submits poets' own mistrust of poetry as an inevitable side-effect of the chronically unsatisfied pursuit of verbal art. He calls poetry "an art hated from without and within" (5).

The problem his essay proposes to address is indeed a very old one, articulated anew here, albeit with many borrowings, as a tension between the "virtual" and the "actual," poetry as we imagine or desire it and poetry as it really is in the poems actually written by poets. Lerner's 2011 novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, wrestled with the very same tension in the character of Adam Gordon, a young American poet on fellowship in

Madrid. Towards the end of the novel Lerner's protagonist, a version of his own younger self, defines a poem as a "failure of language to be equal to the possibilities it figures" (164). This definition obtains in *The Hatred of Poetry* as well, and indeed the failure it describes is the central problem of the book. The essay seeks first to explain the failure and finally to explain it away.

In *The Hatred of Poetry* Lerner tries to answer the question of what poetry is or can be given its long history of apology and self-doubt. He starts by turning the first line of the 1967 version of Marianne Moore's poem, "Poetry," into a refrain for the opening pages: "I, too, dislike it." If well-regarded poets like Lerner and Moore can subscribe to this statement of shared contempt for poetry, how are readers of poetry or the general public to feel towards this pointless, killjoy art?

Poems, Lerner says, tend not to live up to anyone's hopes of what Poetry, capital "P", ought to aspire to do. Lerner traces this tension between poetry and actual poems to Plato's attack

on poets in *The Republic*, but he notes the false start in Plato's critique of poetry. "Somehow," writes Lerner, "it's at once powerless and dangerous" (20). Lerner gives crisp summations of the works or themes upon which he comments and merges them smoothly into his mounting analysis of the problem of poems never living up to Poetry, the "actual" failing to make good on the demands or the dreams of the "virtual."

Much of the slim volume is occupied by quick readings of poems by the likes of Keats, Dickinson, and Whitman. Even while choosing some of the most canonical poems of the most canonical poets in English, the author manages neat and intelligent readings with an air of light improvisation and he works them into his discussion of the actual and the virtual quite well. Lerner shows how these poets "create a space for the genuine," in Moore's formulation, by subtly hinting at the shortfalls of the material of the present. Their poems fail and that's the point. A poet like William McGonagall, whose verse is so bad it's good (at

least for a laugh – or a cringe), demonstrates Lerner’s general proposition by negation. McGonagall’s awful poems believe so earnestly and completely in their ability to span the gap between the actual and the virtual that their calamitous failure is as obvious and embarrassing as the crudest slapstick.

One is grateful to Lerner for reworking an old complaint into a sober celebration of poetry’s potentialities. Likewise, Lerner should be commended for bringing his discussion of poetry’s failure to live up to its imagined possibilities into the political present. After all, Plato’s attack on poetry was political as well. Amiri Baraka’s controversial poem, “Somebody Blew Up America,” gives Lerner an opportunity to expose some of the most pernicious vices of those commentators who still demand universality from poetry. The demand too often stands on hidden racism or colonialism, blind to its own violent contradictions. Interestingly, the quiet aggression of the politics and economics of publishing is enacted on the front cover of this very book. A

line of promotional text runs up the right front edge, declaring Lerner to be “Author of *10:04* and *Leaving the Atocha Station*.” It is sad but fitting that a book on the popular dismissal of poetry advertises itself by silencing the poet’s published titles in favor of the novelist’s.

While Lerner admits that his abiding concern with the historical failure of poems to live up to people’s idea of poetry means that he “doesn’t have much to say about good poems in all their variety” (76), and instead focuses on misguided critics, great poets of thoughtful frustration, or sentimental hacks, his readings reveal a powerful tenderness for poems, in all their variety. He ends with great examples, reading selections from Claudia Rankine’s books, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* and *Citizen: An American Lyric*, and deftly synthesizing the chords he’s struck thus far on the specter of inspiration, contemporary issues of racial injustice, and the difficult politics of aspiring to a general sentiment from the vantage of the individual. He carries this discussion

to the limits of genre and the ways the ‘actual’ presentation of a poem on the page conditions its relationship to the virtual or potential poem of another sphere.

Some of the criticism to be lodged against this volume is certainly an inevitable product of its scope. It is a short book, and one wishes Lerner had treated more poets and poems from beyond the English-language canon, and perhaps beyond the icons of American poetry which give his strongest examples. It’s never clear whether Lerner is talking about poetry in the United States, poetry in English, poetry in the West or just “poetry.” It’s true that this is a short book likely intended for an English-monolingual audience, but it seems to claim the entire history of Western poetry as its object of analysis. A poem like Juan Ramón Jiménez’s famous “Vino, primero, pura” deals with exactly the problem Lerner addresses and would have been a welcome inclusion. Of course, in *Leaving the Atocha Station* Adam Gordon manages to mangle Juan Ramón’s name

in front of an audience towards the tail end of his year in Spain, showing that expectations of what a poet likes or knows are perhaps bound to miss the mark.

*The Hatred of Poetry* might suffer a bit from the same nervous eagerness as the narrator of Lerner’s first novel. On the whole, though, Lerner’s analysis is sharp, his readings apt. But he occasionally makes a sweeping claim that cannot stand up to scrutiny from those familiar with the topic. For example, Lerner places the avant-garde(s) in the camp of the haters of poetry, saying with the example of Marinetti that the historical avant-garde hated the poetry of the moment because it was “part of a bankrupt society” (40). His analysis is generally sound to this point, but then he inverts the direction of the avant-garde’s scorn. The avant-garde attacked the institution of poetry, it’s true, but it rarely did so by attacking individual poems for not living up to a political or poetic ideal, as Lerner claims. In fact, for perhaps the most important avant-garde movement

of twentieth-century Europe, DADA, both ideals and politics were suspect. And in Spain, the avant-garde movements of *ultraísmo* and *creacionismo* had no qualms about praising individual poems or poets. They were, rather, and much like Lerner himself, interested in exposing as ridiculous the Symbolist/Romantic belief that poems could approach divine transcendence. They wanted to make a statement for the here-and-now, but they wanted it to last long into a shining future, free of metaphysical mist. Yearning for the transcendent was anathema to the avant-garde, but that doesn't mean that all other periods aspired to Poet-

ry with a capital "P" as an ahistorical absolute, a yardstick of the poetic impulse in all times and all places. The essay makes this unfortunate implication throughout.

Nonetheless, thanks to and despite its brevity, *The Hatred of Poetry* manages an elegant defense of the art. By responsibly harnessing our contempt for poetry or for individual poems, we can enter the traffic between the virtual and the actual, we can know and feel that by hating (on) poems and poetry we do the art a service and we enact its noblest design: to seek some kind of communion, however wary, through the abstract word.