Moveable Type is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

TO HEAL OR NOT TO HEAL

Max Fletcher

The Topeka School. By Ben Lerner. 2019. 304p. £14.99. Granta. ISBN 978-1783785360.

The Topeka School is the second of Ben Lerner's novels whose front cover his UK publisher Granta has designed badly. The US edition of his previous novel, *10:04*, published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, follows the instructions laid down in the novel by its narrator, a loosely fictionalised avatar of Lerner himself. These stipulate that the book's cover should feature an aerial photograph of downtown New York, in the blackout which followed Hurricane Sandy. Perhaps FSG retained copyright over that image—I can think of no other reason why Granta would have opted instead for an unambitious matt black cover with the novel's title printed in the manner of a digital clock, an image which is in no way anticipated by the narrator and therefore has nothing in the way of Lernerian meta-fictional verve.

In *The Topeka School*, Lerner reuses the device of anticipating the book's material form within the narrative. Having just downloaded porn on his mother's computer, the novel's protagonist Adam Gordon, another avatar for Lerner, is overcome with anxiety that his mother will discover the image on the computer the following day. His anxiety hyper-extends; he imagines this image and his own shame projected on 'screens everywhere': his girlfriend's PC, the paintings in his father's study, the electronics department at the mall and, finally, 'the screens of the future: your iPhone, the cover of this book'.[1] Unsurprisingly, this time FSG didn't oblige and instead used an image of a twister ripping through a mid-western landscape. This does, however, anticipate even better than a pixelated pornographic image the central concern of the novel, which is to illustrate how the germs of America's political crisis were already evident in the lives of Midwesterners in the supposedly more liberal nineties. Granta, however, misfired again and opted to make the cover resemble a high school yearbook for some fictional school in Topeka. Anyone picking up this edition from a shelf, therefore, might be forgiven for thinking that this novel is a work of

---

[1] Ben Lerner, *The Topeka School* (London: Granta, 2019), p. 249. Subsequent quotations will be cited parenthetically in the text.

nineties nostalgia, and not an unmasking of that era as the root of the trauma that is currently dominating American politics.

In *The Topeka School*, the past is not another country, it is shockingly familiar. Whilst in *10:04*, Lerner can look back at the formative moments of his youth—watching *Back to the Future* for the first time, hearing Reagan deliver his 'Touch the Face of God' speech—with a degree of fondness, it is clear that the ascendancy of Trump and right wing populism in the years after that novel was published has forced him to grapple with the darker elements of his upbringing. No longer a prelude to the dazzling, if dizzying, globalisation of *10:04*, the eighties and nineties become an overture to catastrophe, a moment in which neoliberal reforms stealthily gutted American social life of meaning, replacing community with the corporation, altruism with the profit motive and communication with competition. If pundits nowadays bemoan the divided nature of contemporary political discourse, then Lerner's suburban Topeka offers no nostalgic retreat. While Gordon's parents are cultivated psychologists working at the 'Foundation', an incongruous Midwestern hold-out of European psychoanalysis, Gordon spends his leisure time in ritualized linguistic conflicts like rap battles and a form of competitive debating known as 'the spread', whose aim is not to reconcile competing visions of the good, but rather to speak so quickly and with so much information that your opponent simply cannot respond to all of your points, a rhetorical technique which Lerner compares to high-frequency trading, Twitter storms and DDoS attacks. The disparate worlds of the novel all circulate around a central thread, which concerns a contemporary of Gordon's, a young man with learning difficulties who was bullied at Topeka High, Darren Eberhardt. Now that Gordon and the rest of his class are graduating, they decide to make amends for their mistreatment of Darren and to invite him into their world. But the inclusion is in bad faith, and they end up abusing him further by treating him as a curiosity, a kind of talisman, rather than a real person. In the novel's climax, Darren lashes out and throws a pool ball at a girl, seriously injuring her. This is not a spoiler: the ball is kept hovering in the air throughout the novel, and the work Lerner does throughout the narrative is to answer the question of how we got to that moment, with Darren's retaliation coming to symbolise the rise of Trump. Lerner's diagnosis of the present moment seems to be that, in a country in which language and communication has undergone such a sustained assault, it was all but inevitable that violence would re-assert itself.

The worlds in which Lerner finds evidence of the degradation of language in contemporary America are unfamiliar—I can't think of another novel set in the world of high-school debating, for instance—but his placing of communication at the heart of the crisis in America is not, even before the rise of Trump. It is the basis, for example, of many novels of the New Sincerity, which strive to affirm authentic expression in the face of the cynicism of late-capitalism, often, as in the realist novels of Jonathan Franzen, for instance, by reviving forms from an earlier, supposedly more engaged era. *The Topeka School*, by contrast, actually attempts to assimilate the destructive forms that it strives to resist. In a sense, the novel's form resembles that of the spread in that it continuously collapses boundaries between rational categories, leaving the reader disorientated. Lerner's autofictional style, for instance, blurs the distinction between fact and fiction and, while the novel is separated into chapters narrated by different characters, phrases and motifs are repeated across them all, making their voices blur into one. One particularly disorientating technique is Lerner's layering of temporal frames so that events in the novel's present seem to be happening simultaneously with events in the past, and even events in the future. One characteristic passage is the one in which Jonathan, Adam's father, describes a screening of a film adaptation he made of Hermann Hesse's story, 'A Man by the Name of Ziegler'. Hesse's story concerns the plight of an ordinary man who takes a mysterious pill whose effect only becomes clear when he visits a zoo and finds that he can hear the animals viciously mocking their human observers. Having, in Hesse's words, looked into the eyes of a lion and seen 'the immensity of the wilderness where there are no cages', Ziegler goes mad and is institutionalized.[2] In order to adapt this story for the screen, Jonathan dresses up staff from the Foundation in turn-of-the-century garb and uses Midwestern institutions such as the Nelson Atkins Museum in Kansas City and the Topeka Zoo to represent their equivalents in turn-of-the-century Berlin. We're never under any illusion that we're not in Topeka, however: Jonathan is constantly drawing attention to the moments when the film's representational veneer cracks and the real locations and the real people behind the costumes peep through. But these moments are not failures: in fact, they emphasise, albeit glibly, what Jonathan feels to be the continuity between the two time frames, and suggests that Ziegler's madness anticipates the disturbances not only of his own patients at the

---

[2] Hermann Hesse, 'A Man by the Name of Ziegler', qtd. in *The Topeka School*, p. 66.

Foundation, but of many suburban Topekans and, indeed, Americans. Like them, Ziegler 'has lost his faith in civilization, which is five years from mechanized warfare; he has lost faith in the image of antiquity he inherited from the Renaissance [...], in religion and science and the "Jewish science" of psychoanalysis; he has lost his reason' (p. 67).

A disorientating technique—the blurring of time frames—is being used here precisely in order to make the novel's setting unsettlingly clear. If a post-modern novelist like John Barth, for instance, were to write this scene, he might have chosen to make the film's failures to immerse its audience in its world into a kind of *mis en abyme,* reminding the reader of her distance from the world of the text, and of the distance which representation puts between us and the world more generally. Here, in fact, a failure of representation actually reveals a deeper insight into the novel's world. This is a hallmark of Lerner's style which had been noted by critics like James Wood and Nicholas Dames: his novels are only superficially postmodern, in fact they are, in Wood's words, 'earnestly old-fashioned seekers of the real'.[3]

The trouble with this hybrid technique, though, is that the insights it affords are often banal. What does the juxtaposition of Hesse's Berlin with 1980s Topeka give us, beyond a display of Lerner's talent? To start with, for a novel that is ostensibly excavating the roots of the Trump's America, it is profoundly ahistorical. Two time periods are juxtaposed with little regard for what the intervening years contained. Lerner recognizes his anachronism, acknowledging that Hesse's Berlin, which is 'five years away from mechanised warfare', hasn't yet seen the tragedies that Topekans living at the other end of the century would have seen (pp. 66-67). Still, he pursues the comparison, disregarding the fact that it would be nine years until the cost of World War One would even begin to be known, and almost thirty until the full horrors of mechanized warfare would be revealed in the form of the industrial killing of six million Jews. More than thirty, in fact, since Lerner suggests that Hesse's story is set in 1909, even though its temporal setting is never made explicit and the story was, in fact, published the year before in 1908. It's fair enough to say that the seeds of the contemporary crisis in the West were sewn in turn of the century Europe—mechanized warfare and the atrocities of imperialism exposed the darkest sides of reason, and left us all ravaged with nothing more to believe in. That's a familiar, albeit pat, narrative.

---

[3] James Wood, 'Reality Testing', *The New Yorker*, 24 October 2011, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/10/31/reality-testing> [accessed 29 September 2020].

But we don't really get to grips with the complex ways in which those seeds took root and were allowed to grow by simply juxtaposing the moment of their sewing with the moment of their harvesting. Was it inevitable that those seeds should have been allowed to flower? Was there nothing that could have been done in the intervening stages to stem their growth?

This is an isolated moment, but, towards the end of the novel, Lerner does something similar, but in relation to the two periods which the novel is most concerned with comparing—Trump's America and the nineties in which it is largely set. The pool ball which Eberhardt throws comes to symbolise the moon, as though it has been 'hanging in the air […] all his life' (p. 4). At the end of the novel, we move to the present day, and, though the ball has already been thrown, it is still hanging in the air, but now in the form of a 'star', Donald Trump, who famously boasted, in relation to his harassment of women, 'when you're a star, they let you do it.' The astrological symbolism here communicates a sense of tragic inevitability, as though these moments of catastrophe are points in the firmament towards which history is ineluctably sailing. Lerner's hybrid style, which collapses boundaries like post-modern fiction but does so in the service of representation, necessarily produces this fatalism. In collapsing the boundaries between time periods, he is incapable of navigating the real space which separates acts, their causes and their consequences. This space is ambivalent, precarious and mutable: tragedies are never inevitable and Trump didn't have to be elected. He doesn't have to be elected for a second term. But the pious melancholy of this novel doesn't offer much hope for change: the cool literary tricks that Lerner uses to aestheticize hopelessness simply sweeten our resignation.

True, Lerner does try to offer a solution to the current crisis. At the end of the novel, he celebrates the Occupy movement's human microphone, which involves 'those gathered around a speaker repeat[ing] what the speaker says in order to amplify a voice without permit-requiring equipment' (p. 282). If you watch videos of crowds communicating in this way, the first thing you notice is how slow, deliberate and precise the speaker needs to be in order to get their message across. If anything, it requires speakers to be extremely measured and rational, otherwise confusion sets in and the system falls apart. In this sense, it requires a kind of language that is the very opposite of Lerner's, whose dazzling virtuosity does little more than mirror the chaos he diagnoses. This novel doesn't help us move towards a collective kind of speech, to heal the broken state of dialogue in the West. Neither does it represent the roots of the

current crisis in any but the most general of ways. It keeps the wounds of the past in view, but still and unmoving, like the moon or the stars or, indeed, a static image of a twister tearing through a midwestern landscape. In that sense, we might say that Farrar, Straus and Giroux chose their cover wisely.