

Theory of (the Intoxicated) Mind: From Unreliable Narrator to Self-Analysis

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“You have it but you don’t have it. / You miss it, it misses you.” John Ashbery’s “Paradoxes and Oxymorons,” with its tantalizing, maneuvering lines, both describes and performs the impossibility of uncovering a “hidden meaning,” challenging Lisa Zunshine’s Theory of Mind (ToM). Indeed, Zunshine’s concept operates on a basis of *outside-in*: of attributing a person’s outward behaviors to their “underlying thoughts, beliefs, and desires” (Zunshine 276). But what happens when a literary work withholds such outward cues—when narration collapses into a mind whose access to the external world is faulty, fragmented, or intoxicated? In the realm of contemporary first-person literary fiction, ToM grows increasingly impossible as narrative authority falls to unreliable narrators. In turn, I propose an alternative framework: Theory of the Intoxicated Mind (TOIM) — a mode of reading derived *from* the impossibility of mapping causal movements from the internal to external sphere, thereby prompting self-examination of *how* one attempts to grasp meaning from unreliable narration. Ben Lerner’s *Leaving the Atocha Station* overwhelmingly enacts TOIM, as narrator Adam Gordon’s drug-induced consciousness forces readers to abandon ToM’s *outside-in* logic and instead grapple with the divergence between Gordon’s thoughts and the world around him. In pairing Lerner’s novel with Ashbery’s poetics of absent referents, I argue that TOIM not only disrupts ToM but prompts the reader to confront their cognitive reflexes that shape their understanding of the world.

Perhaps the clearest enactment of TOIM occurs in the final portion of the novel, after Gordon downs countless drinks, smokes a spliff, and takes his white pills. He leaves his hotel, only to discover he can no longer find it again: “I told the waiter I was looking for a hotel whose name I didn’t know on a street whose name I didn’t know and could he help me; we both

laughed and he said: Aren't we all ... My irritation turned to worry" (155). Lerner's linguistic construction of the intoxicated mind, along with Gordon's own narration, contradicts Gordon's actual behavior, therefore resisting the logic of ToM. The lengthy, run-on sentence produces a tone of desperation, and the lack of quotations compounds the anxious atmosphere. Dialogue no longer functions as a literary tool to draw one out to the external reality; no, Gordon, along with the reader, remains stuck in his mind. The fact that the phrase "could he help me" possesses no question mark further suggests the narrator is panicked, out of breath, and simply spilling out his words. Due to ToM, Lerner's stylistic choices prompt the reader to envision Gordon's agitated state of mind; the fast pacing and asyndeton evoke the act of panting, which in turn hints at panic. However, the only actual "behavior" the reader witnesses is Gordon talking with the waiter and the two men laughing. The ToM reader would then assume that shared laughter means underlying joy or ease, but Gordon then declares his emotion of "worry." ToM thus fails because it produces two illogical analyses: one, that Lerner's authorial choices are misleading and Gordon is joyous, or two, that Gordon's joyous behavior fails to reflect his "true" worry. Either way, the spheres of external behavior and internal emotion collide against each other with such plausibility that it is impossible not only to determine modes of causality but also which sphere is "true." TOIM then arises because the reader struggles with their assumed right to "intuitively" (Zunshine 277) interpret a character's behavior.

Building on this destabilization of ToM, Gordon's impaired cognizance produces a stark disconnect between his thoughts and the setting around him. Within the aforementioned quote, Lerner writes "I" four times—and within that one page, he writes "I" 35 times. The inundation of the pronoun "I" paired with the swiftly-evolving backdrop produces a dizzying atmosphere. Gordon moves from a street to a cab to El Barrio Gótico, then into a café and finally a second

café, all within two paragraphs. The landscape spins around Gordon; he becomes the only stable thing in the novel's world. While external characters, such as the waiter, appear, they remain nameless, faceless—unstable. The setting shifts with such inertia that one must cling to the self, to the “I,” to make sense of the plot. It is as if one grasps their knees as a friend spins them in a chair. The gravitational pull toward interiority produces a blindness to the outside world. One is literally unable to envision how the self interacts with the world or how the world interacts with the self—details crucial to ToM—since Gordon’s description of reality is drunkenly unstable.

Fascinatingly, Lerner describes this very act of upsetting ToM through Gordon’s interpretation of Ashbery’s poetry. Halfway through the novel, Gordon ponders the poem “Clepsydra” with great focus: “The ‘it’ in an Ashbery poem seemed ultimately to refer to the mysteries of the poem itself; in the absence of any stable external referent, the poem’s procedures invested its pronouns, and the ‘you’ devolved upon the reader” (90). Much like how Lerner places gravity on the “I” through his rapid shifting of setting, Ashbery invests in the “you” through his winding, illogical sentences. Again, the repetition of pronouns paired with the lack of a “stable external referent” induces a myopic vision toward the internal referent of “you” or “I.” One consequently lacks the ability to correlate “people’s behavior to their mental states” (Zunshine 277), as there *is* no description of behavior — only of mental state. At the very most, there is an obscure, unreliable description of behavior. Reading Ashbery and *Leaving the Atocha Station*, one realizes they are not privy to that “something swift, subtle, constantly changing—an exchange of meanings” (272, Sacks). No, the “effortless” (Zunshine 277) tendency to employ ToM arises only to be confronted with an odd absence; the desire to grasp a hidden authorial motive is met with the realization that “there was no actual organizing logic or progression” (Lerner 90). Gordon’s laughter does not reveal a hidden burst of joy, and Ashbery’s slippery

pronoun-play does not present a decodable center of meaning. No, in somewhat of a deconstructionist manner, such things exist only to produce meaning in the reader-text circuit, not in the author-text circuit—an idea I will further elaborate upon.

Lerner provides Gordon's analysis of the poem *before* introducing the “Clepsydra,” thereby allowing the reader an opportunity to experience Gordon’s theories on Ashbery. After the inclusion of the poem, Gordon thinks, “It is as though the actual Ashbery poem were concealed from you, written on the other side of a mirrored surface” (91). This is where my analysis of Ashbery slightly diverges — I argue that there is no “other side.” Gordon falls trap to ToM; he expects an “uncovering” of the “concealed” meaning. However, perhaps the reader is already *in* the meaning. Or more precisely, *experiencing* the meaning. Ashbery says it himself: “As long as it is there / You will desire it ... It is both mirage and the little / That was present” (45-50, 52-53). If “it” is the “concealed” meaning, then Ashbery deems meaning in and of itself a mirage. Indeed, Ashbery’s poetics gain power through *experiencing the experience*: meaning arises in one’s attempt *to* discover meaning. Lerner spells it out: “By reflecting your reading, Ashbery’s poems allow you to attend to your attention, to experience your experience” (90). An intoxicated narration shapes TOIM into being a process of experiencing “your experience.” The impossibility of envisioning the “true” reality or poetic meaning forces one to recognize their faulty tendencies to reach for interpretation and to then re-evaluate how one processes words to construct them *into* different paths of meaning. Simply put, TOIM triggers a self-analysis of one’s interpretive reflexes.

Furthering this point, Gordon’s analysis of Ashbery occurs in a moment of surprising clarity. From pages 90-91, Gordon strictly considers Ashbery’s poetics; the poem acts as a “stable external referent.” Although Gordon reads on the train — which means the external

setting technically shifts — the narration feels grounded because Gordon enacts TOIM. Yes, instead of grasping for “Clepsydra”’s meaning, he considers his own experience of reading it: “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” (91). By accepting that the poem’s meaning will remain “concealed,” he instead reflects upon what he enjoys about reading Ashbery’s poems. His idea of the “best” poems, he comes to understand, are ones that allow one to “attend to one’s attention.” TOIM — and Ashbery, its seeming champion — is thus an entrance to self-analysis: when one is unable to understand how a person’s actions reflect their emotions, or how a poem reflects its meaning, they are left only with the illuminating process of tracing *how* they interpret the dynamic between internality and externality. It is this process that leads Gordon to understand his taste of the poetics. Likewise, a reader who feels discouraged by “Clepsydra” may learn they enjoy simplicity, and a reader who relentlessly seeks the poem’s “hidden meaning” may find they are overly persistent.

Ultimately, by including this segment — that is essentially about TOIM — in the novel’s middle, Lerner prompts the reader to be cognizant of TOIM when Gordon returns to a state of absolute unreliability in the novel’s closing. When Gordon is asked at a panel about the Spanish poets who influenced him, Lerner writes, “the names collided and recombined in my head, and I heard myself say: ‘Ramón Machado Jiménez, which was as absurd as saying ‘Whitman Dickinson Walt,’ and a few people tittered” (117). Even those unaware of the poet Juan Ramón Jiménez Mantecón feel that Gordon had blundered his answer. Of course, ToM prompts one to correlate the action of tittering to the emotion of disdain. Despite this, Teresa then approaches Gordon, “smiling as if nothing had happened, assuring me I had done wonderfully” (178). Again, there is no manner to deduce whether Gordon had blundered or “done wonderfully”; Gordon’s

internal narration counteracts Teresa's external behaviors, and the reader is aware of such. Consequently, one is left not to question which possibility is true but to analyze what one's assumption of truth reveals about themselves. Perhaps the reader who feels Gordon truly blundered is prone to anxiety, is fearful of public speaking, or is insecure about their own grasp of Spanish poets. Perhaps the reader who distrusts Gordon's narration and believes he did wonderfully has themselves performed such an error, only to discover others felt they did just fine. No matter, TOIM lends way to an examination of how one's interpretive reflexes shape assumptions of understanding. This method of reading therefore teaches readers to treat uncertainty not as a failure of interpretation but as the site where self-analysis occurs.

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