

# A PIECE OF CAKE...

## Journal on the translation of *No Art. Poems* by Ben Lerner

by Steffen Popp

Translated from the German by Shane Anderson

*The Lichtenberg Figures*

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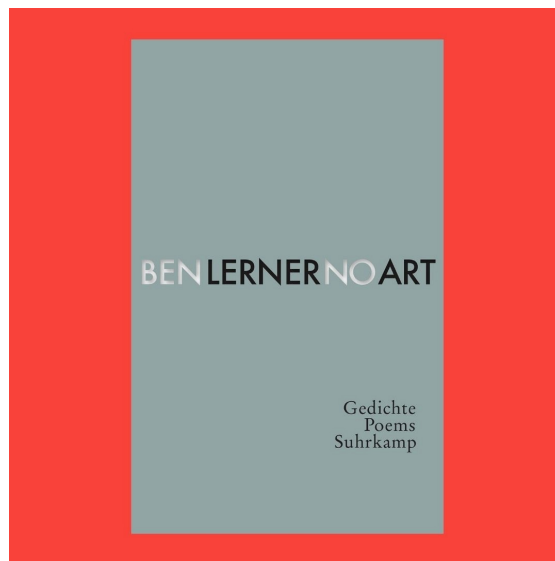
*Mean Free Path*

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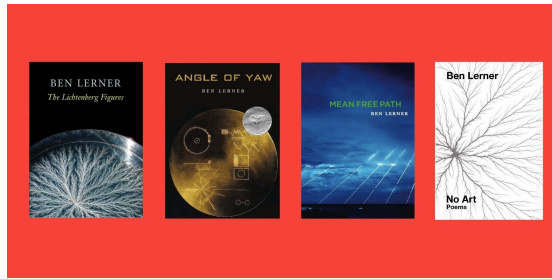
Bilingual sample

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Digital book and Journal launch



Ben Lerner has published three volumes of poetry to date: *The Lichtenberg Figures* (2004), *Angle of Yaw* (2006), and *Mean Free Path* (2010). This spring, all three of these will be published in a bilingual edition by Suhrkamp Verlag as *No Art. Poems / Gedichte*. The Suhrkamp edition corresponds to one of the same name that was published in London in 2016, an edition that includes a few other poems that had only ever been published in magazines before. For the German edition, I also translated the opening poem "Index of Themes" and the closing poem "No Art," which lends its title to the whole collection.



The covers of the original Copper Canyon Press volumes and the edition by Granta Publications.

With the publication of *No Art*, a formidable act of translation comes to an end, as does a long story, a network of paths planned and unplanned that stretches back, with intermittent interruptions, over 13 years. One of Lerner's poems begins with the line: "Gather your marginals, Mr. Specific. The end / is nigh."\* Which— aside from the euphoria and the feeling that this line was a kind of omen in reverse—is just about how it felt when the 512-page bilingual book went to press a few weeks ago. To now unravel this material and explore it one final time here is like a reenactment of that moment as well as a joyful act of excavation.

One thing that became particularly clear to me while working on this current reconstruction was that translating *No Art* was anything but monologic. Indeed, a not insignificant portion of the book was even translated with Monika Rinck in two voices, two sensibilities. Poet friends read many of my translations and offered their advice. An American poet colleague even gave her own reading of the texts that differed from that of the author himself. Fortunately for this project, Ben Lerner showed steadfast interest, answering more than a thousand questions over the years with patience matched only by that of an elephant. It was also beneficial that the material received numerous run throughs: the work began in 2008, resumed with a separate set of texts in 2013 and 2016, and was then dusted off and expanded upon for *No Art* in 2020. At first, I thought of using timeline to present thorough documentation of the winding paths the translation traveled over the years. But then the internal translator intervened: Come on, down into the engine deck of the poems! And since I've stayed true to this idea, some of what's to follow may feel like a thumbnail display in Google Book's search function. A translation's routes are not always linear, often they are better revealed with individual passages in lieu of complete texts, which display a plethora of facets all at once. To compensate for the fragmentation to come, and to also convey a sense of the poetic set-up and specific sound of Lerner's volumes, one poem will be quoted here at the outset in its entirety (another will come at the end) without any detailed commentary. I have limited myself to the first and the last of the three translated volumes in what follows so that the journal will not be overtaxed. Further aspects and details on the translations of all three volumes can be found in my "Translator's Note" at the end of *No Art*.

## *The Lichtenberg Figures*

»Gather your marginals, Mr. Specific. The end  
is nigh. Your vanguard of vanishing points has vanished

in the critical night. We have encountered a theory  
of plumage with plumage. We have decentered our ties.  
You must quit these Spenglerian Suites, this roomy  
room, this gloomy Why.  
Never again will your elephants shit in the embassy.  
Never again will you cruise through Topeka in your sporty  
two-door coffin.  
In memoriam, we will leave the laws you've broken  
broken.«

On vision and modernity in the twentieth century, my  
mother wrote  
»Help me«. On the history of structuralism my father  
wrote  
»Settle down«. On the American Midwest from 1979 to  
the present, I wrote:  
»Gather your marginals, Mr. Specific. The end is nigh.«

I wish all difficult poems were profound.  
Honk if you wish all difficult poems were profound.

»Pack deine Fußnoten ein, Dr. Akribisch. Das Ende  
ist nah. Deine Vorhut von Fluchtpunkten verflüchtigte  
sich  
in der kritischen Nacht. Wir begegneten einer Theorie  
des Gefieders mit Gefieder. Wir dezentrierten unsere  
Krawatten. Gib  
diese Spengler-Suiten auf, diesen geräumigen Raum,  
dieses verheulte Warum.  
Nie mehr werden deine Elefanten in die Botschaft  
scheißen.  
Nie mehr wirst du in deinem zweitürigen Sportsarg  
durch Topeka kurven.  
Zur Erinnerung werden wir die Gesetze, die du  
gebrochen hast, gebrochen lassen.«

Über Vision und Modernität im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert  
schrieb meine Mutter  
»Hilfe«. Über die Geschichte des Strukturalismus schrieb  
mein Vater  
»Bau dir ein Haus«. Über den Mittleren Westen von 1979  
bis heute schrieb ich:  
»Pack deine Fußnoten ein, Dr. Akribisch. Das Ende ist  
nah.«

Ich wünschte, alle schwierigen Gedichte wären tief.  
Hupen Sie, wenn Sie wünschten, alle schwierigen  
Gedichte wären tief.

The poem bilingual as PDF for download.

Lerner's first book of poems, *The Lichtenberg Figures*, consists of 52 'tweaked' sonnets—the one just quoted is number 23. Like every other text in the book, this sonnet has 14 lines, a prescriptive mood characteristic of sonnets, and a reflexive approach—everything else in the poems is disturbance and play as far as the form goes. Thus, the book features numerous combinations of lines. This includes 14 individual lines, a single block of text without any spaces, as well as classic sonnet constructions—our example here is a quasi-English sonnet, whose first two quatrains have been merged into an octave. Instead of regular meters, there are rhythmically free lines of various lengths; and, instead of end rhymes, there are isolated quotations of rhymes and assonances in varying degrees of conspicuity. The sonnet's historical echo chamber serves, on the one hand, as a backdrop that the poems play out in front of and which they also play with. On the other hand, this echo chamber is formally dismantled and completely destroyed at times. The engine deck of the sonnet is surveyed but the common user interface has been removed. In some cases, the machines have been dispelled entirely and only stray parts are lying around, interconnected with new machines, while new parts cover the remnants of the old user interfaces like solar panels and carbon fibers over blasted oak beams and steel girders. In their swift, deliberate calling up of motifs, discourses, and other texts, *The Lichtenberg Figures* have an extremely contemporary feel, the texts are locales where an image-adoring critique of images—suspended in grotesque and often dramatic settings—is put on display. The same could be said of its gestures, its linguistic ironic undertone that goes without being commented upon, its work with montage, sampling and contrast, as well as its meta-poetic moves.

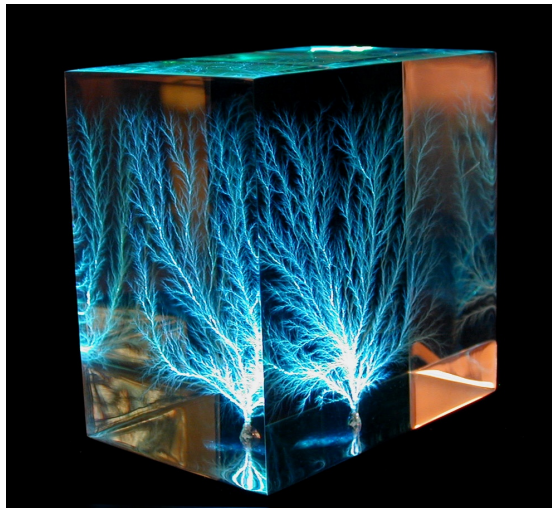
I've basically translated *The Lichtenberg Figures*<sup>1</sup> on two separate occasions, first for a small publishing house in Wiesbaden in 2008-09<sup>2</sup> and now more than ten years later for *No Art*.<sup>\*</sup> For this book alone, several hundred questions have traveled over the Atlantic—some made multiple journeys since my reading of the text changed and previous correspondence (and countless conversations on Skype) have fallen victim to technological 'developments.' That such a vast body would form should have been clear to me when Lerner replied to one of the first questions I had about the book's conception:

»I'd say a general concern for this book was staging a kind of collision between different rhetorical registers – combining the language of literary theory with contemporary slang, making the language of computers or the Internet collide with biblical rhetoric, etc. I felt as a young poet that I spoke many languages within the language – and I wanted the book to be an echo chamber of my various rhetorical modes, revealing the schizophrenic nature of the ›I‹.«

Not exactly an easy start. As for the book's title, I learned in the same email that:

*»Lichtenberg Figures often appear on (and quickly fade from) the backs of lightning strike victims. Because the poems are largely concerned with violence, I thought this was a good guiding image for the relationship between form and violence, violence and memory, etc. The book is a sequence of sonnets (however strange), and I was interested in how the sonnet (or any imposed form) does violence to the materials of experience by stamping it with a particular structure. So I had in mind an analogy between the violence of imposed form and the violence of the lightning strike. I also was interested in Lichtenberg as an aphorist – and the aphorism as a kind of lightning strike of intellection. So both the scientific and philosophical valences of Lichtenberg were significant notions in the book. And of course the book has a lot of small shocks ...«*

Although a translator would do well to cordon off the author's ideas about what the texts do from what they actually do, Lerner's remarks succinctly capture significant aspects of the book. The characteristic tree or fern shaped patterns of Lichtenberg figures are created from high-voltage discharges in insulating materials. And although every Lichtenberg figure has a unique form, they are based on a common structural principle—just like the poems are on the sonnet's structure.



Lichtenberg figure. Source: Wikipedia  
Wikipedia

Also present in this analogy is the issue of violence, both in its physical forms and in its forms specific to poetry and to language in general, which is what Lerner is addressing as one of the book's guiding themes: Lichtenberg figures are not only the structural forms of lightning in the atmosphere but also the patterns left on the skin of victims who have been struck by lightning. In the book, the sonnet is not only destroyed (and celebrated), but traces of violence repeatedly appear as themes and in very different settings. Such as here, where there's a crypto-Marxist subtext:

»My cowardice may or may not have a concrete economic foundation.  
I beat Orlando Duran with a ratchet till he bled from his eye.«

»Meine Feigheit könnte ein konkret-ökonomisches  
Fundament haben oder nicht.  
Ich schlug Orlando Duran mit einer Ratsche, bis sein  
Auge blutete.«

Or, conversely, there's the violence at a party in the 1990s, featuring a travesty of poststructuralist discourses:

»Orlando imbued my body with erotic significance  
by beating it with a pistol. Nothing is as metaphysical  
as the claim to break from metaphysics. At a party in his  
honor,  
we throw our hands in the air. We wave them like we just  
don't care.«

»Orlando lud meinen Körper mit erotischer Bedeutung  
auf,  
indem er mit einer Pistole auf ihn einschlug. Nichts ist  
so metaphysisch  
wie der Anspruch, sich von Metaphysik zu befreien.  
Bei einer Party ihm zu Ehren  
werfen wir unsere *hands in the air*. Schwenken sie,  
als ob wir gleichgültig wären.«

Then it appears in an ironically sentimental self-reflection about a poet experimenting with language:

»Then bullets tore through the soft tissue of our  
episteme.  
We had thought that by arranging words at random  
we could avoid ideology. We were right.  
Then we were terribly wrong. Such is the nature of  
California.«

»Dann schlugen Kugeln durch das Weichgewebe unserer  
Episteme.  
Wir hatten geglaubt, Wörter zufällig anzuordnen  
schützt uns vor Ideologie. Wir lagen richtig.  
Dann lagen wir fürchterlich falsch. So läuft es in  
Kalifornien.«

Or in an outright inventory of the experience and practice of violence:

»My facility with parataxis makes me respected, feared.  
I send my professor thirty dollars' worth of fusiform  
compound umbels  
after her only child is shot and killed. Interwar  
experiments with collage

reflect increasing disenchantment with the sensible  
world.

A wasp attacks me using her ovipositor as a sting.

I strike a teenager with a baseball bat to gain  
blue-collar credibility.

I feel dirty reading on the toilet.«

»Mein Talent für syntaktische Beiordnung trägt mir  
Achtung ein, Furcht.

Ich schicke meiner Professorin gewundene

Zaundolden im Wert von dreißig Dollar,

als ihr einziges Kind erschossen wird.

Collageexperimente der Zwischenkriegszeit

zeigen eine wachsende Enttäuschung von der  
rationalen Welt.

Eine Wespe attackiert mich, nutzt ihren Legebohrer  
als Stachel.

Ich schlage einen Teenager mit einem Baseballschläger,  
um bei der Arbeiterklasse zu punkten.

Ich fühle mich schmutzig beim Lesen auf der Toilette.«

In addition to the author's illuminating insights, one further circumstance helped to ease the workload. Thanks to the use of free verse and the predominance of short sentences that, for the most part, appear on one line or two (and rarely ever exceed three lines), the *Lichtenberg Figures* impose notably fewer formal shackles on the translation in comparison to sonnets composed according to a strict meter and/or rhyme scheme. Yet, their relative accessibility in this regard is more than offset by difficulties of a different nature. The broad spectrum of varying and at times remote tonalities, visual fields, discourses, and technical jargons that Lerner works with is not only research-intensive, for example, but it is difficult at times to even recognize them as such, given the relaxed way in which they're mixed, superimposed, and cut up without any kind of demarcation. And this suggests yet another difficulty: time and again, I had to investigate whether or not specific themes and references in the texts could be presumed to be accessible to an "average American reader of poetry today"—whoever such a reader is imagined to be. After all, whenever something is latently or deliberately cryptic, the translation should not fabricate readability. Thus, for example, there were a number of medical and botanical terms where the Anglicized Latin in the original is common in English but where German tends to use synonyms. Each case needed to be evaluated on its own. My current translation of the *Lichtenberg Figures* in *No Art* adopts a much larger number of 'Latin' words than in my version from 2011.

»I place a terminal raceme of fragrant, funnel-shaped  
perianths

beside the mile marker where Orlando flipped his  
Honda.«

»Ich lege eine endständige Traube duftender,

trichterförmiger Perianthe  
an das Kilometerschild, bei dem Orlando sich mit seinem  
Honda überschlug.«

This verse has a more poetic ring to it in the first translation: “Ich lege eine Trugripse duftender, trichterförmiger Blüten.”<sup>3</sup> But it’s precisely this miniscule technical precision that makes the emotionally and ritually occupied gesture of lying flowers down on the ground absurd. At some point, this led me to say farewell to my beloved *Trugripse* and to properly botanize the translation by using the Latinized ‘Perianthe,’ as in the English.

Now I would like to delve into one further aspect of the translation that was in constant need of repairs: namely, the excessive shifts of meanings in *The Lichtenberg Figures* as well as its revitalizing of antiquated metaphors, the literalization of figurative language and household phrases, and their often unusual couplings. The relative proximity between the source and target languages makes it possible to translate such maneuvers one-to-one at times, but it’s never successful in every case. Take, for instance, the following passage where references to cultural and natural history are interwoven and updated.

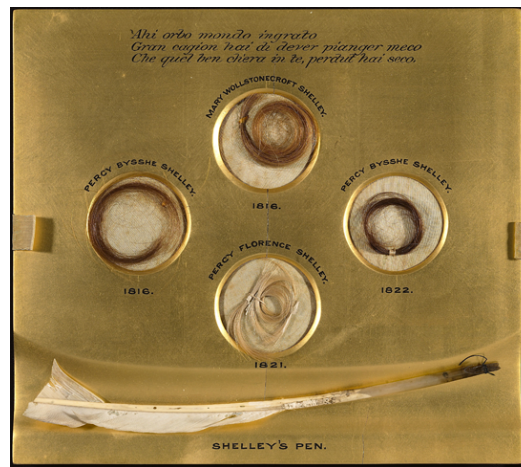
»Darling, my favorite natural abstraction is a tree  
so every time you see one from the highway  
remember the ablative case in which I keep your tilde.«

»Liebling, meine bevorzugte natürliche Abstraktion ist  
der Baum  
gedenke also, wenn du vom Highway aus einen siehst,  
des Ablativs, jener lateinischen Kiste, in der ich die Tilde  
deines Namens aufbewahre.«

On the level of sentences, one of the many questions that arises here has to do with the logical relationship between the first line and lines two through four. The causal connection established with “so” in English and which is translated as “also” in German presumably goes back to a historical signature that connects both parts of the sentence. That “Nature” is utilized as donors of structures that conduct their own modeling is something that can be prominently seen in Darwin’s evolutionary-historical diagrams of tree structures (Horst Bredekamp’s study *Darwins Korallen (Darwin’s Corals)* had not yet been published in 2004).<sup>4</sup> As such, the first line could be read as a reference to the nineteenth century. The reference to the curved tilde in the beloved’s name, the beloved who is literally preserved ‘in language,’ also goes back to this same time period: that is, to the common practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in particular of collecting locks of your beloved’s hair and the hair of famous people in medallions or albums as a souvenir or an *aide memoire*.



Thanks to this practice, we have countless hair records, such as from Keats, the Shelleys, Goethe, Schiller, Mörike and many more.



Locks of the hair from the Shelley family.

A brief feature about locks of hair traces this motif up until Rudi Völler.

But it remains a mystery why the ablative has been chosen as a storage space. Like the tilde, the ablative case doesn't belong to English (and, fortunately for me, neither to German). In the history of linguistics, it dates back to the *Seperativ* amongst other things. Underlying this strangely formal (epistolary?) address to one's beloved is an aspect of separation—just like with the collection of (separated) strands of hair. And yet, all of the above hasn't even touched upon the translation's real difficulties. In our example, the wordplay "the ablative case, in which I keep / your tilde" proves to be particularly resistant to translation. In order to preserve the double meaning of the word "case," which can refer to both grammar and a container, I had to resort to drastic means: In light of its linguistic origins and common habitat, the ablative is labeled as a *lateinische Kiste* (a Latin box) that can archive the "tilde / of your name" (in Spanish or Portuguese, for instance) in a linguistic and physical sense. While the German *Kiste* (box) is several sizes larger than those graceful medallions used by hair collectors, it can keep pace with the double meaning or *Bedeutung* (which is literally a container / figuratively "thing" in German) of "case." Explanatory options like these are frowned upon in poetry translation since they run counter to its economy of language and representations that are indicative—and not descriptive. But this move felt justified to me, for the sake of the Romantic souvenir alone.

And then in the following section, a rather clandestine maneuver was of assistance:

»True, a great work takes up the question of its origins and lets it drop. But this is no great work. This is a sketch sold on the strength of its signature, a sketch executed without a trial.«

»Richtig, ein bedeutendes Werk greift die Frage nach seiner Herkunft auf

und lässt sie fallen. Aber dies ist kein bedeutendes Werk.  
 Dies ist eine Skizze,  
 die sich des Künstlers wegen verkauft, eine Skizze,  
 hingekritzelt ohne Konzept.«

Here, two readings of the phrase “a sketch / executed without a trial” diverge in terms of semantics and phonetics in German. Whereas “eine Skizze, / hingekritzelt ohne Konzept” speaks of an artistic achievement without any prior practice or preliminary drawing, the *de jure* reading “hingerichtet ohne Prozess”—that is, an execution without a trial—doesn’t make sense in the context of the poem although it does have phonetic resonance. What’s exciting for the translator probably remains invisible to readers of the translation just as to those of the original, who follow the lines along the linguistic tracks of art criticism.

In addition to all these detours and constructs, there are still other solutions that give the translation a—slight—twist compared to the original and/or solutions that are instantly pleasing.

»... Rather  
 one must learn to drive, to drive  
 in the **widest** sense of the word, a sense that seats four other senses  
 comfortably.«

»... Vielmehr  
 muss man fahren lernen, fahren  
 im **weitesten** Sinn, einem Sinn, in dem vier **weitere** Sinne bequem sitzen  
 können.«<sup>5</sup>

»I don’t **do** well at school. I could **do**  
 with a bath. Unto others, I **do**  
 injurious, praiseworthy, parroted acts.«

»Ich **mach** mich nicht gut in der Schule. Ein Bad  
**machte** sich gut. Was ich mit andern **mache**:  
 verletzende, lobenswerte, **nachgemachte** Sachen.«<sup>6</sup>

»The stars are a mnemonic<sup>7</sup>  
 Let the forgetting begin.«

»Die Sterne sind eine Eselsbrücke ohne Ufer.  
 Lasst das Vergessen beginnen.«

Besides the diction coming from professional jargon, literary theory, and art criticism, *The Lichtenberg Figures* also features strong political references. Periodically, these

evoke historical and contemporary Americana that are self-explanatory in English. And since there's no space for notes in the poems themselves, I created an apparatus for annotation in *No Art*, which indexes at least some of these passages. Two examples of such are at the beginning of the poem that follows the two lines just quoted, a poem that takes up their theme.

»The forgetting begins.  
Infinitives are hewn from events.  
The letters of your name fall asleep at their posts.  
The dead vote in new members. Police declaw your  
books.

A suspicious white powder is mailed to the past,  
forcing its closure. In order to avoid exposure,  
I use the present tense.«

»Das Vergessen beginnt.  
Aus Ereignissen schlägt man Infinitive.  
Die Buchstaben deines Namens schlafen in ihren  
Stellungen ein.  
Die Toten erweitern ihren Club. Polizei zieht deinen  
Büchern die Krallen.

Ein verdächtiges weißes Pulver wird der Vergangenheit  
geschickt,  
sie soll schließen. Um nicht aufzufliegen,  
spreche ich in der Gegenwart.«

That books can be “declawed”—through state censorship, for example—can be formulated in a very similar way in German. And yet, the English verb *declaw* also suggests the legal and widespread praxis in the US of removing the claws of domestic cats to protect floors and furniture.



This is what such brutality looks like.

In Germany, something of this sort would probably have legal consequences—the idea is so foreign to Germans that there isn’t even a German-language Wikipedia article about it. “A suspicious white powder is mailed to the past” (“Ein verdächtiges weißes Pulver wird der Vergangenheit geschickt, / sie soll schließen”) refers to the preventative closure of numerous businesses in the wake of the September 2001 bioterrorist attacks where spores of anthrax were mailed to US news stations and senators. For American readers, the mere mention of “suspicious white powder” and “sent” evokes this context. Nevertheless, the poem still works if the powder and the closures aren’t tied to this particular event. Here, the fact that the past will close—and thus will probably not be investigated—remains recognizable as a figure of speech just as much as the subsequent allusion to letters of extortion or letters claiming responsibility in the line “in order to avoid exposure, I use the present tense.”<sup>8</sup>

So far, the phonetic and sonic dimensions of *The Lichtenberg Figures* have not been addressed—the use of free verse doesn’t change the fact that Lerner’s poems are elaborate sound sculptures, often fractured and with a different construction from one text to the other. Indeed, it is only through free verse’s liberation from a formal structure that makes numerous phonetic moves and maneuvers possible at all (although in the case of written language notations, one would probably have to speak of virtual acoustics rather than “phonics”). In German, the texts should have a good “sound” natural too, and, whenever possible, they should reproduce tonal movements, gestures, and streaks of the original in formally analogous or functionally adequate registers within the target language. Thus, in the previous example, the internal rhyme of “closure” and “exposure” becomes the assonance of *schließen* and *aufzufliegen* in the translation; and from the poem quoted at the outset, “Your vanguard of vanishing points has vanished” becomes “Deine Vorhut Fluchtpunkte verflüchtigte sich.” In the same text, “this roomy room, this gloomy why” turns into “diesen geräumigen Raum, dieses verheulte Warum” (which has an added, nifty mirroring of *Raum* in *Warum*); and, at the end of the second text quoted above, an off rhyme of *Ehren* and *wären* replaces the internal off rhyme of “air” and “care.” One other important aspect must be mentioned here, even if it has probably already been conveyed through the examples above: namely, Lerner’s grotesque humor, which is at work in these poems as a form of romantic irony with contemporary means, and this represents a further factor in their examination of aspects of violence. One of my favorite passages in this regard has to do with German intellectual history.<sup>9</sup> With his eyes wide open, the author puts his weapons in what are likely to be the wrong hands: “Already, this poem has achieved // the status of lore amongst you little people of New England. Nevertheless, / I, Dr. Samuel Johnson, experience moments of such profound alienation / that I have surrendered my pistols to the care of my sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche.”

## Mean Free Path

I know it’s full of flowers, music, stars, but  
But the pressures under which it fails  
How it falls apart if read aloud, or falls

What we might call its physics  
Together like applause, a false totality  
Scales. The words are just there to confuse  
The censors, like mock eyes on the wing  
Except for *Ari*. No energy is lost if they collide  
The censors inside me, and that's love

And that's elegy. I know I am a felt  
This is the form where my friend is buried  
Effect of the things that I take personally  
A gentle rippling across the social body  
I know that I can't touch her with the hand  
That has touched money, I mean without  
Several competing forms of closure  
Irony, now warm and capable of  
Decay on strings as we descend

Ich weiß, es ist voller Blumen, Musik, Sterne, aber  
Aber der Druck, unter dem es scheitert  
Wie es beim Vorlesen auseinanderfällt oder  
Was wir seinen Aufbau nennen mögen  
Zusammen wie Applaus, eine falsche Totalität  
Gewichtet. Die Wörter sind nur da, um die Zensoren  
Zu verwirren, wie Scheinaugen auf dem Flügel  
Außer *Ari*. Kein Energieverlust, wenn sie kollidieren  
Die Zensoren in mir, und das ist Liebe

Und das ist Elegie. Ich weiß, ich bin eine gefühlte  
Dies ist die Form, in der mein Freund begraben ist  
Wirkung der Dinge, die ich persönlich nehme  
Ein sanftes Kräuseln über dem sozialen Körper  
Ich weiß, ich kann sie nicht mit der Hand berühren  
Die Geld berührt hat, ich meine, ohne  
Etliche konkurrierende Formen von Schlüssen  
Ironie, jetzt warm und in der Lage zu  
Klingen an Saiten aus, da wir hinabsteigen

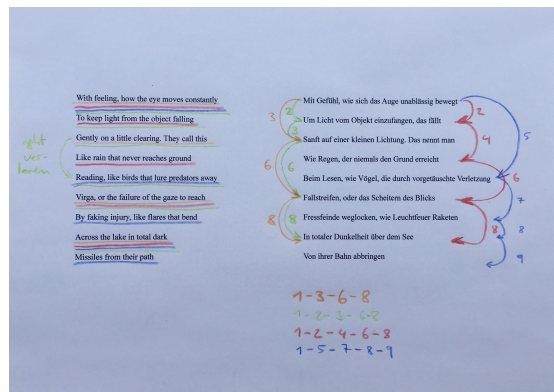
The poem bilingual as PDF for download.

"Mean free path" is the average distance travelled by (sub)atomic particles or molecules before colliding with another particle in a material. As in Lerner's other two volumes of poetry, the scientific term of the title also indicates a poetic method that presented exceptional difficulties for the translation. The poetic Doppler effects and

numerous diffractions and refractions that define the book suggested a dialogic translation, and I was able to enlist Monika Rinck for this undertaking. Initially, we divvied up the poems and translated them independently from each other. After an endless series of meetings and extensive correspondence, these versions became more and more entwined and were also thoroughly altered due to an even better understanding of the many links between the texts. Our communal aim was to retain the dialogical circumstances of the translation in its stylistic and gestural deviations.<sup>10</sup>

The two greatest difficulties we faced throughout the entire book concern the aforementioned physical phenomena and the renderings of such in the poems. Over the course of four long sequences alternating 72 nine-line and eight 27-line texts, a variety of optic, acoustic, and electronic wave motions are taken into consideration. And with them, associated phenomena of deflection, diffraction, and refraction are translated into textual motions. Individual words and parts of sentences appear in the book several times, a fact which would actually demand a homogeneous translation. Yet, these words and phrases often have quite different meanings in the contexts and constellations in which Lerner places them. And, if this weren't already tricky enough, the established meanings are also distinguishable in these instances. These "free paths" of individual "text particles," which are often separated by multiple texts, thus implement physics' concept of the mean free path mimetically. These make up an estimated 20% of the total linguistic corpus. In the first place, these include frequently recurring terms like "voice," "rain," "ground," "cloud," "describe," "across," and household phrases like "Wait / I wasn't finished" and "they call this," which focus the attention on the linguistic corpus that propels the texts. Added to this are words that change their meaning depending on the context, such as "line/s" (as in narrow marks, contours, telephones), "sheets" (as in leaves, pages, slabs or walls), "beam/s" (as in rafters, girders, rays and the "low beam" of dimmed headlights), or "crossed" (as in an X, crossed over, to move across; adding "with" means to mix and adding "by" means passing something). Such a—non-linear and meandering—migration can be seen for instance in "green to the touch" / "green foil" / "gold foil" / "night-vision green" / "night writing." Plays on words often appear on these paths that easily go unnoticed, especially when they're at great distances. One example would be "the mode of address / equal to the war" and seven pages later, "a mode of undress / equal to fascism," which is in a new chapter, tense and semantic surrounding. We have translated these lines as "die Form der Ansprache / die dem Krieg gleichkam" and "Eine Form des Entkleidens / die Faschismus gleichkommt."

Something similar is at play in the individual poems, and this may have posed an even greater difficulty. A host of lines often have multiple connections that are also syntactically delayed, such that, for example, the first line does not predominantly follow in the second line but only in the third, fourth, or seventh, if at all. Some lines in the texts do not have any other connection, others reach out from the text they're in and into the subsequent text. This results in entanglements of synchronous, syntactic strands that sometimes merge with one another but that can only rarely be definitively separated. In attempting to translate this method into German, the structural differences between the source and target languages hit us with full force. The grammatical flexibility of English—the genus isn't marked, the declinations only differentiate between the third person singular—and English syntax—the verb is often within the clause and therefore also within the line—allow for a polyvalence of connections between lines. Reproducing this in German is laborious and rarely ever perfect.



Such considerations had to be made for each individual text and, naturally, for the links that spanned across them. We realized relatively quickly that we would have to abandon some of the multiple connections between individual lines in the texts to allow for the entirety to work in German as a sequence and poetic structure that extends beyond a single text. Of course, we still tried to translate as many of them as possible. In the process, we often stumbled over the question whether some syntactically possible connections in English are read as such or whether they are only covertly present, while a few dominate the work. This gave us leeway to emphasize some reading strands and to pass over connections that didn't have as much textual and semantic weight. This also varied in each text and always had to be carefully considered anew.

In many places, games are played with household phrases, the translation of which I have already discussed in *The Lichtenberg Figures* section. One example here would be the combination of "You / are breaking up. No, down," which is part of a telephone conversation in the poem in question, but it doesn't have to be reduced to it. The abrupt ending of a phone call converges with the ending of a relationship. Here are a few variations we discussed:

Du /

Lässt mich sitzen. Nein, dich fallen.  
 Lässt mich sitzen. Nein, dich gehen.  
 Brichst ab. Nein, zusammen.  
 Legst auf. Nein, gibst.  
 Legst auf. Nein, flippst aus.  
 Hängst auf. Nein, durch.  
 Schweigst. Nein, schreist.  
 etc. pp.

The first two variants only tackle the relationship, numbers four through six primarily deal with the phone call, number seven the behavior in general, but neither of the two motifs. The literal translation—version three—works best here. In the end, we decided for "Du / machst Schluss. Nein, schlapp," since *Schlussmachen* best fits both the ending of a conversation and of a relationship. A further argument for this version has to do with the dichotomy of "up" and "down." This is lost in all the versions mentioned but the chosen version at least has the alliteration and consonance of *Schluss* and *schlapp*. Still, the literal translation remains an attractive alternative. We were also quite busy with another passage where Lerner semantically activates a phonetic



interference.

[...], the memory of **jasmine**  
 Paired organs allow us to experience  
 Contradiction without contradiction  
 Flowering in winter. Is my answer audible  
 Or **mine**, whatever it might mean  
 Relative to scattering, or am I quoting  
 The formant frequencies of anchors  
 ...

[...], die Erinnerung an **Jasmin**  
 Paarige Organe ermöglichen uns Widerspruch  
 Ohne Widerspruch wahrzunehmen  
 Der im Winter blüht. Ist meine Antwort hörbar  
 Oder **Manie**, was immer das meinen mag  
 Im Verhältnis zu Streuung, oder zitiere ich  
 Die Formantfrequenzen von Moderatoren  
 ...

“The memory of jasmine” is admittedly not an optical or olfactory one as might be intuitively assumed, but rather an acoustic one that only echoes through the rest of the word—the act of hearing which is taken up in the poem also speaks to this. In conjunction with the clauses surrounding it, “mine” as a stand-alone word generates a nonsensical request to an audience. The German word *Jasmin* doesn’t have this option. In the end, we only had two alternatives for this: either use the German ending of *Jasmin*, “min,” which would double up the nonsensical aspect of this request by using a nonsensical term (while at the same time serving as an abbreviation of *mindestens* (at least) and the unit *Minute* (minute)), or to embrace Lerner’s phonetic play and twist it some more.<sup>11</sup> *Manie* (mania) expresses another kind of fragmentary perception—not of the word jasmine’s echoes but a shift of its symbolic and acoustic material. At the end of this tour de force through the parkour, where we laughed, cursed and jumped around for weeks, I would like to indicate one more innovation that comes from a free interpretation of the phrasing “permitted to call down,” and which gives me the opportunity to quote one of the “Doppler Elegies” from *Mean Free Path* in full.<sup>12</sup>

The passengers are asked to clap  
     It was always the same  
 window in his poems  
 for the two soldiers. We were delayed  
 In every seat, a tiny screen  
 A tiny bottle. The same traffic  
     High up in the trees, small  
 rain. He held the subject  
     constant. Now I  
 get it. I looked out



over Denver, but could see  
only our reflection. Dim  
the cabin lights. Robert is dead  
Articles may have shifted  
I didn't know him. Why am I  
clapping. We are beginning  
our final descent into  
A voice described as torn

On the recording, I could hear  
the hesitation  
A certain courage. I can't explain  
as music. We could watch  
our own plane crash. We would be  
Our men and women  
permitted to call down  
in uniform. When I heard him live  
it was lost on me

Die Fluggäste werden gebeten zu klatschen  
Es war immer dasselbe  
Fenster in seinen Gedichten  
für die beiden Soldaten. Wir hatten Verspätung  
In jedem Sitz ein winziger Bildschirm  
Eine winzige Flasche. Der selbe Verkehr  
Hoch oben in den Bäumen, kleiner  
Regen. Er hielt das Thema  
konstant. Jetzt

versteh ichs. Ich schaute hinaus  
über Denver, sah aber  
nur unsere Spiegelung. Dimm  
das Kabinenlicht. Robert ist tot  
Gegenstände könnten sich verschoben haben  
Ich kannte ihn nicht. Warum  
klatsche ich. Wir beginnen  
unseren Landeanflug auf  
Eine Stimme als zerrissen beschrieben

Auf der Aufnahme konnte ich  
das Zögern hören  
Einen gewissen Mut. Ich kann nicht erklären  
als Musik. Wir könnten unseren eigenen  
Flugzeugabsturz ansehen. Wir wären  
Unsere Männer und Frauen  
mit Anschauzerlaubnis  
in Uniform. Als ich ihn live hörte  
ließ es mich leer zurück

## Bilingual sample

<https://www.yumpu.com/en/embed/view/Mz83201fdxhl5KCo>

The bilingual sample as PDF for download.



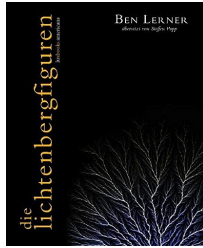
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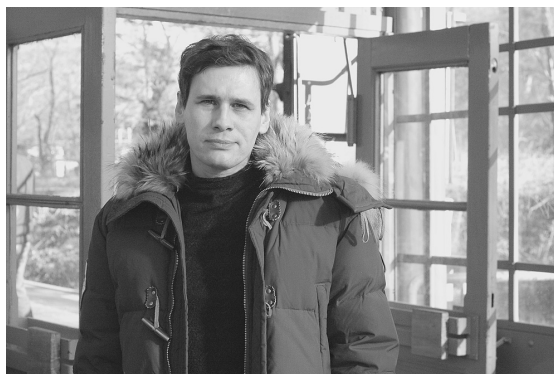
## Endnoten

- 1 You can find more about this book here:  
<http://jacketmagazine.com/26/john-lern.html>  
<http://herecomeseverybody.blogspot.com/2005/03/ben-lerner-is-from-topeka-kansas.html>
- 2



- 3 Literally: I lay down a *panicula cymose* of fragrant, funnel-shaped blossoms [SA]
- 4 "In Darwin's drawings, [Bredekamp] discloses a new facet of evolutionary theory in the form of a Darwinian contradiction, which continues to generate great confusion to this day. Darwin's universally known metaphor for the evolution of species, 'the tree of life,' is false. It would be more correct to speak of the 'coral of life.' But this needs to be cleared first." Wilhelm Trapp, *Die Zeit*.
- 5 *Weiter* has a double meaning here. It can be read as four 'even wider' senses as well as four 'other' senses. [SA]
- 6 *Nachgemacht* is used here for "parroted," which adds one more "do" (*machen*) to the poem than what was already present, and all the other lines in the poem exclusively play with the verb "do."
- 7 The word "mnemonic" has a proverbial equivalent in German: "a bridge for a donkey" or a "donkey's bridge." "Donkey" suggests here that even the simplest of minds can keep track of the connections. But Germans use this image like a faded metaphor, that is, without having the image of the bridge before one's inner eyes. Lerner's line makes it possible to activate the image in the German—a bridge without a shore—i.e. a connection without objects being connected. The meaning in English—which presumably has to do with the fact that the stars that we orient ourselves with on the sea, no longer actually exist—is somewhat altered thereby but the aforementioned effect in German was too nice to not be used here.
- 8 This statement refers to the letters sent during the attacks but also has a performative dimension, since the speaker in the poem is speaking in the present tense. Link: The notes sent in the letters are formulated in a rudimentary syntax, block letters, and in the present tense, which presumably would make them difficult to trace. See: → [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2001\\_anthrax\\_attacks](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2001_anthrax_attacks)
- 9 Besides the title of the book, which refers to the physicist and writer Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, there are further German references in the poems—in the first text used as an example, reference is made to Oswald Spengler and his magnum opus *Der Untergang des Abendlands* (The Decline of the West). In one text, Theodor W. Adorno even plays a leading role as a frustrated piano teacher.
- 10 These circumstances can be found in the translation, we are sure of it! But it's not all that easy to verify anymore, after so many hours of staring at the manuscript independent of one another, but also together. A translation signature by Monika Rinck is the free translation of "genre's edge" and "edge of the genre" as *Gattungseck*, which echoes the names of local bars (*Eckkneipen*) in Berlin.
- 11 Switching to a different fragrant herb that ends in *meine*—and would thus be analog to the English "mine"—was never an option, since "jasmine" is one of those wandering text particles that appear in several poems. Besides, what herb could have worked?
- 12 The following textual drawing defines both of the sections entitled "Doppler Elegies." It didn't make it any easier on the translators that the inconsistent capitalization at the beginning of some lines is intentionally interspersed. "Permitted to call down" is transformed into a typical form of German words that Mark Twain once poked fun at: the compound noun *Anschnauzerlaubnis*—a neologism that perfectly fits the situation.

## #Poetry



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Born in Greifswald and raised in Dresden, **Steffen Popp** lives in Berlin and is active as

an author of poetry and prose, translator, and literary scholar. After studying literature and philosophy, he has published the novel *Ohrenberg oder der Weg dorthin* and four volumes of poetry, most recently *118*. He is also the co-editor of the collaborative book on poetics *Helm aus Phlox*, editor of *Joseph Beuys: Myssterien für alle* and of the poetry anthology *SPITZEN. Gedichte. Fanbook. Hall of Fame*. He has translated American poets like Christian Hawkey and Elizabeth Bishop. His most recent publication, *Das ist hier der Fall*, is a selected works from the poetic oeuvre of Elke Erb. His translation of Ben Lerner's poetry will be published by Suhrkamp Verlag in 2021, under the title *NO ART*.

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