Loose Light

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Loose Light: Analysis and Self-reflection

I decided to use *Loose Light* and *Lost Light* as my honors project because, in many ways, these stories are the cornerstones of my experience at the University of Akron. Both of these stories were born in classrooms in Olin Hall. I wrote the first draft of *Loose Light* in an advanced fiction writing workshop with former English professor Robert Pope in Olin 365. I was a sophomore then, tremendously busy with class, a student assistant job at the library, and a position as copy editor at the campus newspaper, *The Buchtelite*. Those were long and stressful semesters. On production days, I’d work at the library at the crack of dawn until noon, go to class until three, and then work on the newspaper from four in the afternoon until ten in the evening. Then I’d do as much homework as I could on the thinning effects of my last Americano. Since I was still commuting to my parents’ home in Uniontown, I often wouldn’t get home until eleven or twelve.

It was particularly rough in my second semester. I was taking a medieval philosophy course and an early Shakespeare class—both of which required comprehensive research papers late in the semester. But my mind wasn’t on any of that. We were in the twilight of former president Scott Scarborough’s tenure at the University, and everyone at *The Buchtelite* was trying their best to stay on top of the endlessly churning cycle of news. All of this, of course, was compounded by the fact that we, the editors, were working with articles written by a small group of volunteer writers whose output was unreliable at its best and completely incoherent at its worst. Please note that I don’t mean to talk ill of our volunteers. Some of them awed me with their productivity, some with the clarity of their writing. Others were wonderful writers and even better people—people with whom I remain friends two years after my stint there. But most of
our volunteers were faceless email addresses who sent their stories to their section editors, who
then sent them to me, the copy editor. I knew these writers only through my relationship with the
writing that I received late into the production night, writing that I had to hack apart, dissect,
clarify, and rewrite in order to publish it—or, worse, writers who’d promised a story and then, at
the last moment, said they couldn’t deliver, leaving us to research, write, and edit the piece as we
approached deadline. What I’m getting at is that the job wasn’t simply the 4-to-10,
two-nights-a-week gig that I’d thought it was when I applied. It demanded constant attention,
requiring you to be on call at all times, ready to snap a picture for a story, ready to post an article
online, ready to meet with a volunteer writer. You had to expect the worst out of your writers and
staff so you could be prepared to handle the influx of work.

The paper was more than just work, however. It was something I cared for immensely,
something I shared with students who are now among my best friends, something I poured the
nascent intensities of my love for writing.

To get back to my point: I put off two research papers because I was busy doing work I
cared about, work that actually mattered¹, and then one evening after a late production night I
realized I’d need to finish both before the following morning. That night, in the underbelly of the
Student Union², I finished both papers in a typhoon of caffeine-fueled frenzy. I inexplicably
received an A for the mystifying contents of my medieval philosophy paper on Thomas
Aquinas’s theory of the steps of knowing. My Shakespeare professor, however, gave my writing
the harshest lashing that it’s ever received.³

¹ Take this with a grain of salt. I’m a procrastinator who enjoys rationalizing his procrastination.
² This is where The Buchtelite’s office was located.
³ I won’t divulge the professor’s name, but I’ve always felt we need more English professors who will call students
on their bullshit. I was aptly told that I was substituting stylistic flair for a lack of thorough research, and that I was
making absurd generalizations of 300 years of scholarship.
In all of this chaos, I worried sometimes that I’d lose track of my creative impulse. I never loved newswriting; instead, I loved the hunt, the heat and hustle of long hours, the approaching deadlines, cellphones buzzing in your pocket while you waffle between stories. The writing itself was anemic, simple, unadorned and unbiased. Once you find the formula, it becomes even less interesting⁴. You find a hot lede and breadcrumb the information toward its natural conclusion, if there is one, or simply state the facts as they’re known. You sprinkle in a few comments, toss in a couple of links at the end, and viola. I suppose there’s a sort of topiary elegance in all the cutting, trimming, and hemming you must do to your sentences to arrive at the clearest, quickest way to the truth, but it was at odds with what I wanted my fiction to be. Moreover, I was devoting valuable writing time to this instead of fiction.

Fortunately, I was enrolled in a workshop every semester of my Buchtelite tenure. Without those deadlines, I may have never written more than a few throwaway story ideas, snippets that I would’ve lost below the piles of news writing. Instead, I managed two and sometimes three full-length short stories a semester. As I’ve already mentioned, I developed bad habits while writing for the paper. While I adhered strictly to the paper’s deadlines, I neglected my schoolwork—of which these stories, although a joy to write, were a part. The day before a deadline, I’d work in the dark of the Buchtelite office, hammering away at the Apple keyboard, filling pages with whatever subconscious nonsense came out of my head. I wrote Loose Light, the first of the two stories, in spring 2016. In its puerile form, it was shorter, more mysterious, more excessive in its description. I can’t tell you how the idea came to me. Looking back, I think

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⁴ Understand that with our skeleton crew it was almost impossibly hard to produce even a 4-page biweekly of just basic writing. We couldn’t exactly leap into photojournalism or dazzling color pieces or even in-depth profiles when we often lacked the resources to tackle even the simplest breaking news. We did, fortunately, manage to begin experimenting just before the newspaper shut down in the spring of 2017.
this experience subconsciously formed the basis for the story’s introduction: Bernard’s late-night vigil at Swasey Observatory, his eyes trained blearily on a computer screen, a mug of coffee cooling on the table beside him.

The premise of the story is that, many years ago, Bernard discovered an immensely strong energy signature in outer space. He’s completely taken by the notion that he’s discovered something entirely new, something with which he can remake himself. Following that day, he commits his every waking hour to charting the cosmos, hoping to locate the source of the energy.

The backdrop to his quest is a family that he once loved dearly, who have become increasingly distant as Bernard passes year-after-year without finding the loose light, as it’s called. In the present, when the story is set, he is sailing deeper into middle age. He spends his nights in the observatory basement monitoring his stars, wondering bitterly about his wife’s potential infidelity, lamenting the fact that neither of his children share his love for the sky. It’s the old story of the obsessed losing themselves in the obsession. Like many of my stories, the plot is not central. One could call the story science fiction or speculative fiction (it is undeniably set in the future, and it moves around the axis of this fictional space phenomenon), but its heart is its characters rather than the mechanics of its narrative.

I didn’t know it then—this was one of the first full stories I wrote as an undergraduate—but this would become recurring in everything I’d later write. I often sacrifice cleverly, carefully manipulated plots for long and thorough explorations of consciousness. Obsession is easy to condemn when you’re caught in the gravity well of mania. To appreciate it, you need to step into a character who knows nothing but his sole, driving desire. I especially enjoyed writing *Loose Light* because Bernard’s obsession isn’t inherently detrimental. Although
he isn’t religious, when he explains his love for the stars to one of the observatory’s interns, the intern tells him that many people love God in the same manner. The story, then, is about what falls through the cracks.

Lost Light focuses around a similar character, although Raymond’s world is warped by trauma rather than obsession. He was hit by a bus while crossing the street and begins losing his memories in the wake of this accident. He uses the memory of his grandmother—who he cared for as she succumbed to Alzheimer’s—to ground him in the present, but finds it increasingly difficult to manage his life. Then he meets Elizabeth, a woman whom he encounters when he moves into a new apartment complex. Although she is unaware, Raymond is quickly losing track of which day is which. The narrative is fragmented, disjointed, and disorienting. It progresses randomly, leaping from one moment of their budding romance to the next. Raymond learns that she cuts herself. When he asks why, she admits that there is no past trauma that encourages her to self-harm. Instead, she’s depressed, closed off from the world. Self harm, she tells him, gives her something to control.

As before, the plot of the story is ancillary. Their suffering does not build toward conclusion or catharsis. There is no reprieve for them, and that’s alright. The story, instead, is the beauty of their suffering, the pain that they’re willing to share. I like to view it as a song, a progression of notes and images that accrete into a mosaic.

I wrote Lost Light many months after I wrote Loose Light. They were never intended to be companion pieces. Any similarities were accidentals in the frenzy of creation. But as I was looking through my writing to choose what I’d use as my honors project, I realized just how closely linked these stories are. At the time, I was listening to a lot of Leonard Cohen. I’d been
carrying a specific line with me: “There’s a crack in everything/that’s how the light gets in” (Anthem). It captured everything that I wanted these stories to be. I’d already decided to name the collection Loose Light, and I opted thereafter to use Cohen’s words as an epigraph.

I won’t be able to condense what the light is in these stories into a pithy line. Light is hope and joy, but also the unattainable, the stars we’ll never reach, the things we’ll never see nor do. It’s the love below the suffering, the beauty between the shadows. It’s the sharp pang of tragedy, the sad note of a lasting pain. Light is the embers dying by the riverside, the naked flourescent alone in the room. Light is a beating heart and a dying star. It’s a child’s laughter, a dog’s mangled cry. It’s the crooked gleam of dreams, the cold glitter at the back of the eye.

Ultimately, I think, the light represents everything I wanted to write about when I set out to write these stories, and then again when I set out to rewrite them, edit them, and bind them together: the beautiful, terrible mystery of the human heart.
I grew up in Hartville, Ohio, a small town whose football teams and churches captured most of the townspeople’s passion. Poetry, music, and literature weren’t discouraged, but they were usually seen as strange hobbies or distractions. Somehow, in my senior year of high school, I cobbled together a writing group out of the ten awkward poets and fiction writers that showed up to the first club meeting. I was still waffling between chemical engineering and English as potential majors, but this group—this community of creatives—led me to choose the latter.

Because I took Advanced Placement American Literature in high school, I, for some reason, had the privilege of skipping the first level of basic composition at Akron. So, in my first semester, I started in comp 2. The class wasn’t at all what I expected. My professor was enthusiastic about experiential learning, so most of the semester was devoted to developing a formal presentation to convince donors to fund a nonprofit organization of our choice. We had to volunteer at our chosen nonprofit’s facilities. Then we had to write, produce, and edit video clips to show the donor group. It was and still is one of the few English courses I’ve taken at The University of Akron that genuinely pushed me out of my comfort zone. I was a shy, lurking kid back then, so I think this kind of “field work” paved my way to my eventual post as a writer/editor on the school newspaper.

The next semester, I took English Literature and Critical Reading and Writing. I can’t say much about the former except that it was what I, a high schooler, imagined what being an English major would entail: reading old books and writing papers about them. The lectures were at worst tortuously awkward and at best bearably boring. The class was, in a word, forgettable.

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5 This first section comes from a reflection paper I wrote for my English senior seminar. I wrote it as a summary of my time as an high school student and then undergraduate, and what led me to pursue an MFA.
Critical Reading and Writing, on the other hand, made me feel, for the first time, like a writer. Our professor had us writing weekly essays on whatever we were reading. We were constantly readings novels, essays, poems. I spent weeks developing a paper on the ambiguity in Henry James’ *Turn of the Screw*. It was the first time that I felt inspired by what I was writing, the first time I felt a sense of mystery and discovery.

In the first semester of my junior year, I took my first creative writing workshop. This was a game changer. Before, I’d written my fiction halfheartedly, without direction or purpose, enjoying fragments of stories that only had meaning to me. The workshop environment opened my borders; writing for my professor, my peers, gave shape to my shadowy ideas. Our professor gave us short exercises to develop our “toolbox” of writerly skills. I loved every one. I experimented, using new voices, different tenses. I mingled with genres I’d never considered before.

That same semester, I took Intro to Linguistics and American literature. The former was too quick and too far-reaching a survey for me to have retained anything but the rudiments of the subject. I enjoyed the course, and wish there had been an advanced-level course on the same topic. American Literature reintroduced me to the authors I’d read tangentially in high school. The class discussions were among the first that I thought contributed beneficially to my experience as a reader. The professor staged in-class debates as well, which generally improved how I operated as a student.

During my sophomore year, I also became an editor for the student newspaper. The year-and-a-half I spent there was maybe the most formative of my experiences as an English major. None of my courses prepared to me to interact with and interpret the world the way a
writer should quite like my time as an editor there, nor did my professors teach me the
fundamentals of writing like the newspaper’s advisor did. He taught us to appreciate concision
and clarity, to be exact but engaging. When I, in my junior year, became the managing editor, the
position gave me the chance to recruit, train, and tutor and staff of volunteer writers. I don’t think
my experience as an English major would have been half as valuable without this experience.

With that said, the newspaper was also the singular most stressful trial of my time at
Akron. We were understaffed and overworked. Our writers were students first and volunteers
second, which meant we were fortunate when they followed through with their writing
assignments. If they didn’t, we had to find time to write the articles ourselves (usually during the
night of publication). Several times, we discovered that our writers were plagiarizing their work,
which meant we had to choose between cutting it (and finding some way to fill the white space
on the page) or, again, rewriting it ourselves. To make things worse, many of the section editors
on the paper staff didn’t give a damn about what they were publishing. One of them, we
discovered, was copying information from websites and pasting it into her weekly column.
Others were barely able to wrangle in enough articles to fill their sections. Others simply didn’t
edit or write with any force unless it was on a rare topic that they cared about, which meant the
quality of the paper frequently suffered.

I particularly enjoyed and excelled in Advanced Fiction Writing. In this higher-level
course there were, unlike the introductory workshop, no exercises. We wrote full stories and
workshopped them. I wrote fiction that, for the first time, felt whole and complete. Many of the
people who had taken the introduction class were now in the advanced workshop, which meant
we were developing a certain chemistry. There was something communal about learning how
each person wrote, how they spoke and gave feedback, how they wrote within their preferred genre, how they chose to explore their own style and voice. On the advice of my professor, I started considering pursuing an MFA after graduation.

Nineteenth-Century British Poetry was par for the course. I read and I wrote. I discovered poets like Wordsworth and W.H. Auden who are now among my favorites. I was beginning to find my own rhythm, a way of working that made long papers—that had seemed so daunting in high school—into enjoyable rituals. This continued into my junior year when I took Writers on Writing, Young Adult Literature, and Thoreau, Emerson, and their Circle. In the latter two classes, I wrote two different papers about Ursula Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea* series. It astonished me how open my professors were, even how excited they were, to help me develop an idea that stretched beyond the curriculum. Meanwhile, Writers on Writing introduced me to nonfiction writing, which I pursued my senior year in two courses of creative nonfiction.

I decided early into my senior year that I’d pursue an MFA. The decision, in the end, was a culmination of the time I spent in my academic workshops, in the workshops I’d held outside of school, and of the year-and-a-half I was a journalist. I knew that I didn’t need to pursue an MFA to write. But I also knew that I would never again find a community so keenly focused on writing as students in a good graduate fiction writing program.

Four months later, I was accepted into the University of Michigan’s prose writing program.
Influences

I discovered the authors who would most significantly influence my work in the winter break of 2015-2016. I was working at the ASEC science library, which afforded me a lot of reading time. I plowed through a stack of books that included Anthony Doerr’s *All the Light We Cannot See*, Lauren Groff’s *Fates and Furies*, Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, and Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*. I found in all of these books a sort of wild outpouring of passion. Their prose was ecstatic, full of color and life. Sometimes, like a Cohen song, these writings veered into the sublime. They explored the world subconsciously, poetically, conjuring images that escaped the immediate senses. I found in them a playful mastery, a type of tamed excess. It made my nerves fizz. *This* was what creative writing should be, I thought. Not a conduit for information or even a vehicle for higher thought—no, I wanted words to dance on the edge of intelligibility, making you reach for something you were never quite sure of.

This passage of *Blood Meridian* is what I’m talking about: “The surf boomed in the dark and the sea’s black hide heaved in the cobbled starlight and the long pale combers loped out of the night and broke along the beach.”

And, a few lines down: “A ship’s light winked in the swells. The colt stood against the horse with its head down and the horse was watching, out there past men’s knowing, where the stars are drowning and the whales ferry their vast souls through the black and seamless sea.”

These lines blur the truth and the poetic. They strive toward a feeling, an atmosphere, by sacrificing clarity. Often we don’t understand *exactly* what McCarthy is saying. His similes and metaphors reach too far, the words trying to probe beyond the boundaries of conscious thought:

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That night they rode through a region electric and wild where strange shapes of soft blue fire ran over the metal of the horses’ trappings and the wagonwheels rolled in hoops of fire and little shapes of pale blue light came to perch in the ears of the horses and in the beards of the men. All night sheetlightning quaked sourceless to the west beyond the midnight thunderheads, making a bluish day of the distant desert, the mountains on the sudden skyline stark and black and livid like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear. The thunder moved up from the southwest and lightning lit the desert all about them, blue and barren, great clanging reaches ordered out of the absolute night like some demon kingdom summoned up or changeling land that come the day would leave them neither trace nor smoke nor ruin more than any troubling dream.⁷

You’ll find that the prose itself becomes a part of the story, a landscape with which the reader must contend.

I suppose I wanted to emulate this kind of writing because, when I was discovering these authors, I was the copy editor for *The Buchtelite*. I was writing clearly, precisely, revealing nothing but factual evidence. My editing, too, was honed, cutting away any and all excess from the page. Fiction, then, was my release, my way into this world of extravagance. You can find examples of these “reachings” scattered throughout both stories.

In *Lost Light*, Raymond has a panic attack after encountering an old woman that reminds him of his grandmother. Afterward, “[he] drives home as the day cools and darkens. The sun

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sinks and a fog rises up from the wet earth and skates across the asphalt and the dusk murmurs to him.”

I haven’t yet developed the gall to plunge fully into the incomprehensible. I hope I may some day. But this turn toward mystery, the unknowable and impossible, is a direct impact of my readings of McCarthy.

A similar effort can be seen in *Loose Light*, when Bernard reflects on discovering the loose light:

> When he found the Alpha Radiation, that coil of unexplained world-shifting, he felt, in that moment, something he had never felt before and has never felt since: a presence that made his nerves fizz and his soul hum. The loose light scoured the grist of his twenty-four years of aimless study and chatter from his body and remade him nascent in a lighter, wider world.

To put it short, Bernard feels as though he’s “[has] touched a corner of infinity.” His structured and contained life opens up, and the writing reaches to match this sensation. It veers into excess to show the state of open yearning that young Bernard experiences as a young man.

With all of this said, however, I still find myself using the brevity of news writing. Instead of a required confinement, it is now a tool, a way of opening up the world in my stories. Raymond’s, for example, begins like a report:

> Raymond is illegally crossing the Main Street-St. Jude Street intersection on a June morning when the 8:15 bus from Akron to Canton trundles around the corner. He hears the chuff of hydraulics just before the flat head of the bus hammers the light out of him. He is twenty-five years old.

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8 Logan Lane, *Loose Light*, 35.
9 Lane, *Loose Light*, 5.
Now, looking forward to a three-year commitment to the University of Michigan, I’m excited to not only discover how my writing evolves, but which tools and techniques that I developed at the University of Akron remain with me. I know, however, that I won’t lose this sense of mystery. Writing should always be an act of discovery, an effort to pioneer, to reach, to strive. When I read, I want to feel the same sense of surprise that the writer should feel as they find what’s out there past consciousness.
References