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Peter Gizzi's hypothetical lyricism: Some Values of Landscape and Weather (2003) and The Outernationale (2007)

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Peter Gizzi's hypothetical lyricism:
Some Values of Landscape and Weather (2003)
and *The Outernationale* (2007)

In his two most recent books, *Some Values of Landscape and Weather* (2003) and *The Outernationale* (2007), Peter Gizzi finds new ways to renegotiate the lyric tradition: ignoring the neo-confessional conception of the self as well as the radical yet illusory refusal of subjectivity, Peter Gizzi proposes a new poetical critique of the lyric "I." If he does not refuse to say "I," the poet does not consider however that his poetic "self" goes without saying. On the contrary, the "I" in his poetry is the object of a methodical doubt, suspended as it is between presence and absence, interiority and exteriority. The lyric subject is not conceived as a self-enclosed entity: rather, its variable morphology is constituted by the moving and tense relationship between the subject of the enunciation of the poem and the many figures the self cuts in the text. In his work Peter Gizzi elaborates a hypothetical "I," the poetical condition to a new lyric song, a "Chanson en si" (T. Corbière) coming from the battlements of "Château If."

Dans ses deux derniers livres, Some Values of Landscape and Weather (2003) et The Outernationale (2007), Peter Gizzi tire le lyrisme de l'impasse dans laquelle il se trouvait, pris entre la veine néo-confessionnelle de la poésie américaine et le refus aussi absolu qu'illusoire de toute marque de subjectivité par certains poètes contemporains. S'il ne refuse pas de dire « je », il n'abonde pas pour autant dans le sens d'un « moi » qui trait « de soi » mais le soumet au contraire à un doute méthodique poétique, en jouant sur la tension entre absence et présence, entre intériorité et extériorité. En concevant le sujet lyrique moins comme une substance donnée que comme la relation mouvante entre le sujet de l'énonciation et les manifestations du « je » au sein du poème, Peter Gizzi façonne un lyrisme hypothétique. C'est à cette seule condition que le chant du poème reste possible, une « Chanson en si » (T. Corbière) que l'on entend depuis le « Château If ».

"A History of the Lyric"

Opening a book by Peter Gizzi is venturing into lyrical territory, the reader is told: most blurbs mention the engagement of this American poet,

recently appointed poetry editor of *The Nation*, with the tradition of the lyric. His collection of poems, *Artificial Heart* (1998), was said to be “on the quixotic mission of recovering the lyric” [Andrew McCord, see Gizzi 1998]. On the back cover of his last book, *The Outernationale*, Adrienne Rich writes: “Peter Gizzi’s disturbing lyricism is like no other—the innermost whirl of the daily curtain rising on outer catastrophe.” The press release issued by Wesleyan University Press adds that “*The Outernationale* . . . continues [Peter Gizzi’s] compelling renegotiation of the lyric tradition.” Once the necessary brevity of blurbs acknowledged, one has to admit it is difficult to know exactly what is meant by “lyric”: the word, appearing in different guises (the adjective “lyric,” the nouns “lyric” and “lyricism”), often acquires its meaning from the context in which it is used. What thus appears to be an obvious quality of Peter Gizzi’s work, its lyric aspect, begs to be defined.

Continuing the experimental tradition of American poetry, Peter Gizzi himself seems to be puzzled by the term “lyric” when it is applied to his poetry: “. . . at a reading someone said, ‘You’re really a lyric poet.’ When I asked her what she meant, she said, ‘Well you’re not a narrative poet.’ To which I responded by saying that I think I am a narrative poet—I’m just narrating my bewilderment as a citizen. . .” (Gizzi 2007, 49). Although Peter Gizzi insists on the narrative dimension of his work, he does not deny that he is a “lyric poet”: he simply casts aside its restrictive definition as someone who does not relate stories. Revealing the difficulty to agree on the meaning of lyric writing, this anecdote also shows that Peter Gizzi’s conception of lyricism goes beyond the traditional opposition between lyric and narrative. In *The Architext: An Introduction*, Gérard Genette has shown that classical theoreticians falsely attributed to the ancients (Plato and Aristotle) the mapping out of the literary space into three genres, the lyric, the epic and the dramatic: the lyric came to be considered as a pot-pourri of any writing that did not belong to the narrative or dramatic category (Genette 39-40). However, Genette shows that the initial definition of the purely narrative mode (the dithyramb) had a common point with lyric poetry: the poet was the only subject of the enunciation, the only person speaking in the poem (Genette 38-39). When Peter Gizzi says that he’s “just narrating his bewilderment,” he is offering a personal definition of his lyric mode of writing, bypassing the generic opposition between lyric and narrative. What matters, both in terms of the narration and of the emotion felt (being bewildered), is the lyric subject as the subject of the enunciation of the poem: he (or “I”) feels and he (or “I”) tells. In that sense, it is true to state that Peter Gizzi aims at renegotiating the lyric tradition.

In the 1980s, Marjorie Perloff considered that such a renegotiation and its correlative attempts at defining (or practising) the lyric were becoming urgent. Commenting on the publication of *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, she wrote:

The [lyric] genre continues to be defined normatively—it is this situation that bedevils current discourse about poetry. For nowhere in *Lyric Poetry* do we find discussion of the following questions: (1) Is “lyric” merely another word for “poetry,” as the interchangeable use of the word in the collection would suggest? If so, why talk about “lyric poetry”; if not, what other kinds of poetry are there and what is their relationship to lyric? (2) How has lyric poetry changed over the centuries? . . . How and why is lyric more prominent in some periods than in ours? And (3) since the etymology of the word *lyric* points to its musical derivation, what does it mean to write of lyric poetry as if its sound structure were wholly irrelevant, a mere externality? What, for example, does the choice of a particular meter mean? Or the choice of a particular set of linguistic strategies? (Perloff 17)

For Marjorie Perloff, the transparency of the term “lyric,” its thinness and lack of substance in critical discourse were the result of the still prevailing conceptions of New Criticism: the poem was meant to be an impersonal, unhistorical, autotelic object (Perloff 17).

In the steps of poets such as Frank O’Hara, Jack Spicer and John Ashbery, Peter Gizzi brings answers to Marjorie Perloff’s essential questions about the nature of the “lyric.” Although his book *Some Values of Landscape and Weather* opens on the long poem “A History of the Lyric,” Peter Gizzi does not elaborate a systematic theory of lyric poetry; instead, he develops a practice of lyricism from which the meaning(s) of the lyric can be reconstructed. Poetry can succeed where theory fails:

If we ask that every song touch its origin
just once and the years engulfed

If problems of identity confound sages,
derelict philosophers, administrators
who can say I am found (“A Panic That Can Still Come Upon Me” *TO*, 2)

To the multiplicity of the terms (lyric, lyrical, lyricity, lyricism) and of their uses, Peter Gizzi’s history of the lyric can be said to focus on the lyric subject, on the problematic tension between its grammatical and syntactical appearance in the line (“I am,” “me,” “myself”) and its presence, within the folds of the poem, as the voice who utters the line (the subject of the enunciation [Rabaté 65-66]). “Who can say I am found”: the original loss of the self leads to a proliferation of relations. The poet pretends to be looking for two persons, “I” and the person who might be capable of “say[ing] I am found.” But the poet might also be daring anyone to say “I am found,” thus inviting the reader to read himself or herself into the poem. And one may ponder upon the different directions the line points to: indeed, it is difficult to know whether the last line is a relative proposition connected to “derelict philosophers, administrators” or whether it is a genuine question asked by the speaker, voiced by the poem. Peter Gizzi’s lyricism is about “problems of identity,” although not in a confessional way which would demand that language translate his inner feelings onto the

page. The poet's "problems of identity" are grammatical and syntactical: having no existence prior to their verbal expression, they do not exist outside of language. "I am far and I am an animal and I am just another I-am poem, a we-see poem, a they-love poem./ The green. All the different windows." ("It Was Raining in Delft" *SVLW*, 81)

In confessing that "I am just another I-am poem," the poet (or the voice of the poem) is staging his awareness that the literary ground he is exploring—that of the lyric—has been downtrodden for centuries, to the risk of being exhausted by incessant passage ("Things that have already been said many times" ("It Was Raining in Delft," *SVLW*, 81). Instead of offering a one way ticket to poetry, from life to the page, the poet insists on maintaining "different windows," opening multiple vistas on the self.

"Peter Gizzi" steer[s] clear of writing "I am" poems that make his inner life our roommate—which is no surprise, since today such stuff is as plentiful and wearisome as skateboards. . . . Gizzi is well acquainted with lyric poetry's potential for linguistic bravura, but he is not entirely in thrall to it. His poems manage to be . . . free of the occupational hazards of contemporary lyric poetry: presumptuous egotism, grating allusiveness, treacly insouciance. (Palattella R16)

As the blurbs quoted at the beginning reveal (his lyricism is either "recovered" or "disturbing"), Gizzi's poetry goes against the grain of conventional "lyric" writing today. The main question is to know how the poet manages to keep writing in a lyrical vein when so many others fail, when so many poets are not even aware that they fail.

Peter Gizzi's poetry addresses Marjorie Perloff's concerns quoted above. 1) No, lyric poetry does not go "without saying": "lyric' is [not] merely another word for 'poetry'," it has its own quality and specificity. 2) Peter Gizzi's history of the lyric is not linear; however, the essential historical issue he raises is the question of its possibility today, in times of pain and war.

If enumerations of the fall
and if falling, cities rocked
with gas fires at dawn
.....
if children, soldiers, children
taken down in schools
if burning fuel

Who can't say they have seen this
and can we sing this
.....
Too bad for you, beautiful singer
unadorned by laurel
child of thunder and scapegoat alike
(*"A Panic That Can Still Come Upon Me"* *TO* 2-3)

The model of the lyric singer of yore proves inadequate. 3) Yet Peter Gizzi also renews with lyric poetry's aspiration to song. To find a space where singing will not feel out of tune with the world, such is the poet's quest. "Can I still say 'I' or 'myself'?" and "Can I still sing?" are the two sides of the same question. In 1951, in a talk given at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Wallace Stevens said that

. . . in an age in which disbelief is profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief, . . . men feel that the imagination is the next greatest power to faith: the reigning prince. Consequently their interest in the imagination and its work is to be regarded not as a phase of humanism but as a vital self-assertion in a world in which nothing but the self remains, *if that remains*. (Stevens 170)

As if a faint echo of Stevens's lecture were reaching us today, the last few words, "if that remains," give a new import to contemporary doubts about subjectivity. "If the self remains" could be an apt password into the lyric territory Peter Gizzi invites his readers to explore, the land of his conditional lyricism.

1. Absence without leave

"The self is farther than it appears": such could be the secret subtitle to Peter Gizzi's lyric adventure. In "A History of the Lyric," the "I" is indeed conspicuously absent from the first "chapter" entitled "*Objects in mirror are closer than they appear*" (SVLW 3). The pronoun "you" is its only distant presence, a grammatical stand-in, a mere prop which soon collapses and gives way to a long enumeration of objects.¹ In the very first pages of *Some Values of Landscape and Weather*, the self is shown to be receding into its own absence, defecting to the material world. Perhaps is this the only possible way to begin—and to keep on—writing the self in modern poetry, bearing in mind the lessons taught by such poets as Rimbaud and Ponge. Things, shapes, sounds and colours fill the void left by the self: "Where am I in this thing called morning / with a ricochet of boys in the street, / the walls lemon with olive shutters. . ." ("Etudes, Evidence, or a Working Definition of the Sun Gear," SVLW 72). The objective world flies to the rescue of the self who has lost its bearings: "So things come together, one / and one. And if one, and if // an overwhelming sense of rescue: / fallen leaf. Broken acorn. Schoolyard tears" ("*In the garden*," "A History of the Lyric," SVLW 9).

Not only has the lyric subject forgotten its own whereabouts in the world, it also seems to have lost all relation with itself. In spite of the gram-

1. In that section of the poem, "you" finds itself in no glorious position: "they [the objects] are right next to you / in the lanes, hugging a shoulder // they twitter in rafters / calling down to your mess . . ." (SVLW 3).

matical presence of the lyric "I" in the poems, absence prevails and morphs into an absence from oneself, a form of absent-mindedness: "Sometimes I am so far from myself / the stumble above only makes it worse.// . . . The distance is keening and sharp with tears. / This distance is loose wire free of its mooring" ("Take the 5: 10 to Dreamland" *SVLW* 36). From losing to loosening oneself, the "I" seems to have shed all hopes of ontological unity; the proliferation and outpouring of distance ("loose," "free of its mooring") expresses the vanishing of any coherent sense of authority: it's all "stumble above," all stutter. Lyric presence in Peter Gizzi's poetry does not rely on unabashed lines of "I-me-myself" but rather on the exposure of grammatical manifestations of the self to doubt and erasure. In "Beginning with a Phrase from Simone Weil," the last poem of *Some Values of Landscape and Weather*, the philosopher's phrase, "There is no better time than the present when we have lost everything," expands and transforms itself in the final stanza: "Is there no better presence than loss?/ A grace opening to air./ No better time than the present." (*SVLW* 96) There is indeed no better presence of the self than what its initial loss allows for; it is striking that the last line of the poem repeats Simone Weil's sentence, only taking out the idea of loss itself, as if loss could also be finally left out; as if what mattered and happened between "presence as loss" and "the present" was "a grace opening to air." In these final lines of the book, the lyric "I" and "we" have disappeared only to listen to (a) grace opening to the lyric air of the poem. The absent presence of the lyric self is none other than the voicing of its absence in the air as poem, as song.

2. Inside out

In Peter Gizzi's poetry, the presence of the self comes in the shape of a doubt, of a question: "A child I became a question / sitting on the grass./ To be told how lucky I am./ An open field." ("Stung," *TO* 13) The autobiographical impulse of the first two words soon peters out into the progressive abstraction of the "I." The final line quoted here can be read as a strange metaphor for the lyric self: an image giving a shape to the "I," yet grudging it any specific contents. Besides the possible allusion to Charles Olson's poetics [Olson 386-87], the metaphor of the open field can also be understood against a conception of the lyric subject as a self-contained entity, precisely defined and closed upon itself. The self can only survive by opening itself up to questions, thus writing its own ontology as methodical doubt:

I would like
to expose doubt itself
to open up
the mechanics of want
-ivorous, -etic, -esque, so
someone can feel it
("The Outernational [2]" *TO* 99-100)

The poet's "mechanics of want" aims at elaborating a critique of contents and substance. At the same time as words are gutted, hollowed out and reduced to a litany of suffixes, making for a constant verbal stumbling in the poem, the lyric "I" repudiates the idea of interiority, a mere illusion. "The difficulty of being here is what do we transmit of ourselves that we can ever really know?/ The single benefit of food is that we recognize it is food./ Can you spot the decoy?" ("Imitation of Life: A Memoir" *SVLW* 33) There is no psychological or confessional food to be passed onto the reader in his poetry: the decoy is precisely the "inner" experience the poet is supposed to "ex-press" on the page. Writing with one's "guts" or "heart" makes no sense if one considers such organs as containers of emotions to be exported into literature. The lyric subject is more of an outsider than an insider.

When interiority, perceived as a threat, reveals the possibility of enclosure, the self steps out:

I was beside me as architecture,
 solid as a house, a hovel made of sticks,
 a shack whose chimney is a cloud at dusk,
 a broken shack stove in by a single vista,
 a room where countenance continues to fall,
 a retinue of hair. ("Masters of the Cante Jondo" *SVLW* 58-59)

This portrait stages a degradation of the metaphors chosen to define the self, from a solid house to a ramshackle shed, to a more abstract room. In the same way as the shack and its chimney seem to evaporate in the third line, the face collapses in the last but one line. "De la vaporisation et de la centralisation du Moi. Tout est là" (Baudelaire 676). Gizzi's "centralisation" of the self functions through a critique of the notion of countenance both as "face" and as *contenance* (from the Latin *continere*: to hold together). "No amount of cable will connect this structure" ("Imitation of Life: A Memoir" *SVLW* 33): Peter Gizzi's lyric subject cannot keep its composure nor can it hold itself together, and it is defined as architecture (house, hovel, shack) only to step aside and to contemplate the illusion of interiority from the outside. The disfigurement of the self is enacted in the text by the multiplicity of images defining it: the face does not "hold together" because the poet wilfully suffers from metaphorical incontinence. Metaphors do not hold or keep, contents are emptied out as soon as they are proposed: the lyrical subject cannot be ascribed any specific ontological substance. It is at best a "retinue of hair"—a perverse expression as it both expresses motion (a group of attendants who travel with someone of importance) and containment (retinue comes from the French *retenir*).

Perhaps then is escaping the only way for the self to avoid being immobilized by a precise image, description or definition. The first poem of *The Outernational*, "A Panic That Can Still Come upon Me," ends on the following lines:

If the crowd in the mind becoming
crowded in streets and villages, and trains
run next to the freeway

If exit is merely a sign (*TO* 3)

Running will not do: the last line shows that the escape hatch is but an illusion, it does not lead anywhere. If the poem is indeed the song of an illusory escape, it should nonetheless be added that the exit sign points to the only possible route: the only way “out” is not to be found in so called “reality” but in the land of signs, in language.

3. Reaching “m-y-s-e-l-f”: Zeno’s arrow

Peter Gizzi’s poetry is animated by two seemingly contradictory impulses: a desire to escape from the self in its traditional sense and a will to come as close as possible to the “I” in the poem. His work thus seems in keeping with a philosophical and literary tradition analysed by Karl Malkoff in his study of American poetry:

... It is important to realize that the loss of a potent self, which has often been characterized as *the* contemporary illness, does not necessarily lead to terror and despair. Some of our most influential thinkers have not only welcomed this loss of self, they have advocated it with an urgency that derives from their conviction that many of the horrors of the modern world spring precisely from the traditional definition of the self. For them it is probably more accurate to describe the phenomenon under consideration not as the *loss* of the self, but the *escape* from the self. (Malkoff 2-3)

Malkoff’s analysis is based on close readings of the work of poets such as Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, the Confessional poets and some of the Beat poets and ‘members’ of the New York School. Since his study was published at the end of the 1970s, the critic did not go on to mention the critique of subjectivity undertaken by the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. One may read Peter Gizzi’s work in the wake of this critique initiated before the 1980s—although in no theoretical way—by poets such as Frank O’Hara and John Ashbery. However, it is important to note that Peter Gizzi rings changes on the poetic approach of the self. Yes, there are instances in his work when the lyric subject seems to be on the run,² as if fleeing its own shadow or about to do away with itself:

If I am a bridge I am standing on, thinking,
saying goodbye to myself
when I stood by the water in life

2. “I ran away. I ran/ away. Above everything/ I held one true thing./ This scene moved through me./ a seesaw” (“Stung,” *TO* 13).

thinking of my life, pine boughs
the hill next to water (“A Panic That Can Still Come upon Me,” TO 9)

But rather than the theme of escape of or from the self, what should be noted is the paradoxical way it is treated formally and poetically: at the same time the self is shown to be on the run, the poet tries new ways to get closer to it. As if, taking stock of the critique of traditional subjectivity of the past decades, the poet were now ready to say “I” again—or at least to attempt to do so. This paradoxical approach to the self is here revealed in the tension between the marks of subjectivity (“I am” repeated twice, “myself,” “my life”) and their pre-emption by the initial hypothesis “if” which qualifies the subsequent statement. This is all fictional, the poet says, all conditional: so much depends on “if.” The impossible morphology of the lyric “I” in those lines (it is standing on itself) is symbolical of Peter Gizzi’s aesthetic: he only says “I” when the self, suspended in the void by the initial conjunction “if,” is about to jump off into the water, the poet knowing he can drop the pronoun at any time.

The opening pages of *The Outernational* display the range of what one may call Peter Gizzi’s hypothetical lyricism. From the very first line of the book, the authority of the lyric “I” is sapped, its expression undermined:

If today and today I am calling aloud

If I break into pieces of glitter on asphalt
bits of sun, the din

if tires whine on wet pavement
everything humming

If we find we are still in motion
and have arrived in Zeno’s thoughts, like

if sunshine hits marble and the sea lights up
we might know we were loved, are loved
if flames and harvest, the enchanted plain
(“A Panic That Can Still Come upon Me” TO 1)

The lyric space of love, the locus of “the enchanted plain” and the cry of the poet, seer and singer, are all pre-empted by the litany of hypotheses. “I am” does not mark the origins of Gizzi’s poetic world, the conjunction “if” does. The condition “if” applies both to a somewhat exalted vision of the lyric “I,” “calling aloud” to the world, and to a chaotic portrait of the self collapsing, breaking “into pieces.” “If” is the instrument of a methodical doubt applied to subjectivity, regardless of the qualities thus undermined. In such a context, the presence of Zeno of Elea may allow us to establish a parallel between the paradox of the “arrow” and Peter Gizzi’s approach of the lyric “I.” According to Zeno’s paradox related by Aristotle, the flying arrow is a mere illusion: one has the impression that it flies when

it is really at rest. The line "If we . . . have arrived in Zeno's thought, like" is inconsequential, it does not move; like most of the poet's hypothetical clauses, it does not lead anywhere but to the word "like" left dangling at the end of the line. If we still thought the poet was leading us to some specific place, we have the confirmation here that he wants to leave us (and himself and his self) hanging in language. One never reaches one's final destination or the object one aims at, "because of [one] having to reach the half way point before one reaches the end" (Aristotle 239b9, 161). Always at one remove, objects and persons maintain a distance, the intermediary space of "like": such is the poetic territory inspired by Zeno. The irreducible space which keeps the arrow from reaching its target is akin to the unbridgeable distance Peter Gizzi maintains around the lyric "I."

The only architecture which may finally suit the self is the fictional space of "Château If," the first section of the poem "Fin Amor":

If love if then if now if the flowers of if the conditional if of arrows the condition of if

.....
 if I say myself am I saying myself (if in this instant) as if the object of your gaze if in a sentence about love you might write if one day if you would, so if to say myself if in this instance if to speak as another—
 if only to render if in time and accept if to live now as if disembodied from the actual handwritten letters m-y-s-e-l-f . . . (SVLW 82-83)

One could read the endless chain of "ifs," the "conditional if of arrows," as the laborious movement towards the self, a progress which can never quite reach its destination, thus missing its mark in the end.³ The proliferation of conjunctions as arrows even dissects the self when the pronoun "m-y-s-e-l-f" expands accordion-like, as if the hammering of inconsequential hypotheses were bound to lead to its breaking down and thinning out. Each hyphen finding its way into the pronoun can be read as the typographical materialization of an "if," of an arrow: instead of having flown out, aimed at the world, "the conditional if of arrows" is suspended within the self, disrupting its structure. "If I say myself am I saying myself": the poet is not only aware of the lack of coincidence between being and saying myself, he is also concerned by the discontinuous experience of saying myself from one moment to the next. Avoiding aporia and motionlessness, Peter Gizzi continues to say, to speak, to write without shirking the consequences of his methodical doubt: "To live now as if disembodied" is precisely what happens to the self in his poetry, the only way for the "I" to maintain itself without lying or lapsing into indecency. To say "if" is there-

3. Although these lines are excerpted from *Some Values of Landscape and Weather* and not from *The Outernational* where the presence of Zeno is summoned, one may say that "the conditional if of arrows" looks forward to the presence of the philosopher in the opening pages of *The Outernational*.

fore the only way for Peter Gizzi to voice a lyric “I,” the only way to say and sing the world. “If I,” “if the world” are the two axes of his poetic universe: it is then tempting to read his title as *Some Values of Landscape and “Whether.”*

4. “Nobody came before”

The disembodiment wished for in “Fin Amor” could pass for a mere literary pose, a metaphor of contemporary angst, if it were not a poetic principle of the poet’s work. Peter Gizzi elaborates an aesthetic of disembodiment which contributes to salvage the lyric self exhausted by ages of over-exposure. Disembodiment should then be understood as abstraction from “the actual . . . letters m-y-s-e-l-f,” to quote the poet’s line in full. The tension at stake is between the verbal incarnations of the self in the text (“I, me, myself, we, ourselves”) and its withdrawal in the folds of the lines as the subject of the enunciation of the poem, the invisible speaker. Such is the variable morphology of the lyric “I” in Peter Gizzi’s poems. “*The ethics of dust,*” the second part of “A History of the Lyric,” opens on the following lines:

to think I have written this poem before
to think to say the reason I came here
sound of yardbird, clinking lightbulb

to think the world has lasted this long (*SVLW* 6)

Gizzi’s history of the lyric bids farewell to the conception of poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” (Wordsworth 266) These lines stage the first appearances of the “I” in *Some Values of Landscape and Weather*: far from taking the lyric “I” for granted, the poet denies it any immediacy by rhetorically delaying its entrance in the poem. In the first line, “I” is preceded by “to think,” and in the second line the rhetorical layer triples: “to think to say the reason.” The self does not go without saying, without someone—or the poem—voicing it. Peter Gizzi reveals the mechanics of his ontology: “I am” always implies “To think I am” or “To think to say the reason I am.” These are not merely rhetorical niceties but the expression of the moving relationship between the “I” in the poem and the subject of the enunciation:

Le « je » de l’énonciation est dans un rapport mouvant avec le « je » de l’énoncé, à la fois but et source, effet et cause. Cette tension, qui ne se résout pas en une dialectique, fait ainsi porter l’accent sur l’instabilité de ce sujet : le sujet lyrique *en question*, c’est-à-dire ce sujet comme question, comme inquiétude, comme force de déplacement. (Rabaté 66)

“To think I” is the literary space of doubt opened up by the poet, the buffer zone between the subject of the enunciation (the voice of the poem), and the many grammatical shapes the self assumes. As soon as the subject

presents itself in the lines above, it is sent back into the past (“I have written,” “I came”) as if the lyric “I” could not manifest itself grammatically without risking petrification. Instead of being located in nouns and pronouns, “the lyric subject . . . as a force of displacement” should be understood as the tense movement from the infinitive verb “to think”—waiting to be conjugated or uttered as an exclamation—to the past tenses attributed to the two grammatical subjects in the poem. “To think I”: the self in Gizzi’s poetry is dependent on breathing and enunciative assistance. The lyrical “I am” is summoned to wager its presence and existence at each reading of the poem.

“To think I have written this poem before,” the first line of *The ethics of dust*, plays with the illusory idea of a lost original poem. There is no “before” to the poem we are reading: “this poem before” is none other than the poem we are reading each time we are reading it. In the same way, the lyric poem is not meant to reveal the original identity of the self. “. . . no there is no precedent of history no history nobody came before / nobody will ever come before and nobody ever was that man,” Frank O’Hara wrote in “For the Chinese New Year & for Bill Berkson” (393). Similarly, in Peter Gizzi’s poetry, the lyric self is not a given substance, a constituted identity the words should serve and translate as accurately as possible: there is no ontological precedent to the poem. “Le sujet lyrique n’est donc pas à entendre comme un donné qui s’exprime selon un certain langage, la langue changée en chant, mais comme un procès, une quête d’identité.” (Rabaté 66) Such a process is revealed in the fifth movement of “A Panic that Can Still Come upon Me” when the poet writes:

if I wanted to go all over a word
and live inside its name, so be it

There is my body and the idea of my body
the surf breaking and the picture of a wave (TO 11)

The variable geometry of the lyric self appears here in its complexity: the poem bears the marks of its presence, whether hypothetical (“if I”) or plainly stated (“there is my body”). However, what should be noted is the general movement towards abstraction, when the body gives way to “the idea of my body” before being washed away by “the surf,” itself replaced by a mere image. This abstract movement is the lyric process at work: as in the naïve imagery of Épinal, the lyric subject is not where one thinks it is. The self is not to be found in the first three words, “If I wanted,” which are at best a hypothetical prop, a mere decoy. The self is hidden in the folds of the performative expression “so be it,” one of the rare consequential clauses in the book. Although in the second line quoted above the “I” has disappeared, the lyric self is more than ever present in its engagement as the subject of the enunciation of the phrase “so be it,” replacing the more traditional and static “I am.” When the poet says “I am,” his identity is limited to the attributes of the grammatical subject. Here, by withdrawing into

the enunciation of the poem, the self fulfils its desire to live inside the name of a word, inside language. Its identity is no longer limited to one specific proposition, “I am x or y,” but expands into a correspondence between the self as speaker and language as it is spoken: the “I” no longer cuts a clear and specific figure in the text, its body becomes the poem itself.

The desire for disembodiment marked by metaphors of fragmentation and disfigurement leads to the erasure of subjective contents from the poem, to the retreat of the lyric “I” to its abstract position as the subject of the enunciation. Paradoxically, this self abstraction allows the lyric “I” to have greater pretensions and to embrace the entire poem as its own body, as its new self. Lyricism in Peter Gizzi’s poetry does not rest on a conception of the poem as a receptacle for the poet’s feelings: this would imply that there is something “before” or “outside” the writing, whereas lyric interiority for the poet is the inside of the poem and of language. In “Saturday and Its Festooned Potential,” the call of the outside is cancelled at the end by the absorption of all space and temporal dimensions “inside the poem”:

When the mind is opened forth
by a gentle tink tink
or light speckled
and whooping in the periphery

.....
When twigs swaying
just outside
the library’s large glass
signal, scratch, and join
to an idea of history

When twigs scratching
join to an idea of time
to a picture of being

Like to be beside and becoming
to be another and oneself
to be complete inside the poem

To be oneself becoming the poem (*TO* 59-60)

Peter Gizzi’s lyricism could be summed up by the final line, “to be oneself becoming the poem,” a new equation for the traditional “I am.” When one reads the end of this poem, one has already become the poem. One has already become a lyric subject without having uttered “I am” (the verb “to be” is not conjugated): one has become the voice of the poem. Peter Gizzi does not so much say “I am” as his poem does it for him, animated by the readers’ voices:

By the time of this speech
the original has vanished

without promising emancipation
The sound is a body

This sound is my body
(“(song),” “Masters of the Cante Jondo” SVLW 61)

The issue raised here is whether there ever was an original, a self preceding the poem. “By the time of this speech / the original has vanished”: these lines are reminiscent of spy movies where secret messages are meant to self-destruct once read. Only the opposite situation happens in Peter Gizzi’s poetry: the lyric subject self-constructs only when the reader as special agent completes his reading of the poem.⁴ “This sound is my body,” the sound of the poem, the sound of language is “my” body: the body of the self, the body of the poem voicing the self, the body of the reader reading the poem. “My voice in what you say” (SVLW 6): in other words, “I” am what you say “I” am, “I” do not exist before “your” voice breathes life into “me.” As in much of Gizzi’s poetry, the “you” can here be simultaneously understood as the “you” of the poem—or, more generally, of language—and the “you” of the reader. Gizzi adds:

at this moment you say
wind through stone, through teeth
through falling sheets, flapping geese
everything is poetry here
(“*The ethics of dust*,” “A History of the Lyric” SVLW 6)

Although the “I” is absent from this section of the poem, one can say that this is a moment when the lyric subject is expressed most powerfully. The self is not grammatically present, and therefore it is not limited in the poem. Lyric expression here is the exact coincidence between what the words say and the words themselves, between what is enunciated and the process of enunciation, between meaning and voice. When one reads “at this moment you say / wind through stone, through teeth,” one is saying “wind through stone, through teeth,” one is going through the poem as Peter Gizzi’s lyric subject, one is singing and saying “everything is poetry here” on behalf of the poet. Lyricism then is the perfect correspondence between the words “this moment,” “here” as they are written down and as they are voiced, between what is written and what happens, between the poem as possibility and the poem as performance.

4. “Consider this as an address/ of an agent to his operative./ Hello you, if that’s okay ...” (“The Deep End,” SVLW 28).

Alone together

If “I” am what you say “I” am, there is the possibility that the nature of the lyric self changes according to the reader who breathes life into the lines. To the question “who is the ‘I’ in your poems,” Peter Gizzi answers:

Well, it’s me and not me. When I write, it’s something just next to me—the observing I. To speak with an honest interplay of knowing and not-knowing. For me if a poem is a closed, contained vessel, it’s dead on arrival; instead, I want to leave some part of the poem open so that I or another reader can enter it again and again. In a poem the I is always the reader as well as the poet. (Gizzi 2008, 61)

The risk for the lyric self to lose its identity because of its abstraction and openness is welcome rather than feared. The notion of identity is not contained in the poem; it depends on the interaction of the reader with the lyric subject as a variable in the poetic equation:

So many strangers
 alive in a larynx.
 So much depends on x
 so much more
 on the book in your hand.
 Start from nothing
 and let the sound reach you. (“The Outernationale (2)” TO 93)

The final “you” here applies indistinctly to the reader and the lyric self as they are becoming one in the process of reading the poem: let the sound of the poem reach you as it constitutes you—the self, the reader and the poem. “You” have started from nothing in the first line but by the end of the poem, “you” have undergone a change:

I love the opening to Beckett’s late novel *Company* ...: “A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine.” That the book is titled *Company* but the voice comes to “one.” It’s a wonderful description of how it is to be in a cinema, an inherently public experience—to be alone together connected by images and phantasms of light and shadow, dreams. But it’s also a wonderful correlative to being alone in one’s room in one’s library, memory, alone together in one’s books and a voice comes to one and then a poem begins. A world comes to one. And for a moment you are your self and another becoming another thing, a poem. (Gizzi 2008, 58)

These comments hint at two related dimensions of Peter Gizzi’s lyric project which would require further scrutiny: the reflection on the possibility of a common language capable of uniting myself and “company”; and the dream and need of singing in a war-ridden world.⁵

5. “if children, soldiers, children / taken down in schools/ if burning fuel/ Who can’t say they have seen this/ and can we sing this ...” (“A Panic...,” TO 2-3).

The title of his last book sums up what is at stake in Peter Gizzi's poetry: a negative of the "Internationale," *The Outernationale* seems to be a modern symphony the movement of which is centrifugal, rejecting individuals away from the centre (of power, of civilization) to the margins, thus excluding them. The neologism "outernationale" turns the idea of nation inside out: what is questioned is the very possibility to relate (a story, a feeling) to someone. In a time when the public sphere is shrinking, what is at stake is "our" ability to be and speak together in a world which mass-produces isolation. In that case, the renegotiation of the lyric self is a way to adjust to this new situation and to find new bearings in the world:

This is winter where childhood lanterns skate in the distance
where what we take is what we are given.

Some call it self-reliance. *Ça va?*
To understand our portion, our bright portion.
("Last Century Thoughts in Snow Tonight," *TO* 55)

Peter Gizzi's own version of self-reliance is not satisfied with "what we are given," as the ironical "ça va?" hints. The self's lot can be improved if one turns away from solipsism, "if speech can free us" (*TO* 6), if poetry offers hope for the creation of a collective "we." "[The] dangerous state [we are in] feels metaphorically 'out-of-doors' to me, outside the discourse of power and this out-of-doors (or outer) position or voice has proved useful to imagine selfhood or to make a voice that is at once neglected and empowered because of it." (Gizzi 2008, 57)

The prefix "outer" is therefore not exclusively negative as it also hints at a vantage point from which the lyric self can speak, hoping that its voice will be joined by others:

.....
o say, can you see?
What does it mean to wait for a song
to sit and wait for a story?
For want of a sound to call my own
coming in over the barricades,
to collect rubble at the perimeter
hoping to build a house, part snow, part victory,
ice and sun balancing the untrained shafts,
part sheet music, part dust, sings often——
the parts open, flake, break open, let go.

.....
These parts wobble, stitching frames
to improvise a document;
all this American life. Strike that.
All our life, all our American lives gathered
into an anthem we thought to rescue us,
over and out. On your way, dust. ("Revival" *SVLW* 51-52)

The long awaited song, which the poet begins to write in his poetry against a perverse version of the national anthem, comes from the margins where everything crumbles, “flakes, breaks open and lets go.” But isn’t this space the limbo-like region inhabited by Orpheus who, torn apart by the Maenads, began to sing? Perhaps is this one of the oldest ideas hinted at in “The Outernational (2)”:

. . . writing along the edge
 which is of course
 writing about hope

 Have you a single
 new idea? Yes,
 I carry the oldest ones.

Who will live
 inside the song? (TO 94-95)

The answer does not come from the name of Orpheus but from the invitation issued in the third part of “A History of the Lyric”:

if the dark speaks what does it say
 in a dark time. As words choose me

are they mine, and the counterpointing wind.
 If a catalog inserted here, your name here.

If the road turned, if your erratum
 came to naught (for *with* read wick,
 for *tear*, read torn), if you found me.
 (“*In the garden*,” “A History of the Lyric” SVLW, 8)

“Your name here”: no one is invited in particular, no one has exclusive rights to “live/inside the song,” all are welcome. In the margins of the dominant discourse of power, outside of the language of social, economic and political oppression, Peter Gizzi is inviting any reader to inscribe his name within the poem and join forces with “me” in “dark times.” “Your name here”: the invitation sent to the reader is above all sent to language itself. It is the name of language the poet calls upon in “A History of the Lyric”: it is up to the reader to accept the invitation on behalf of language itself and to embrace this “outer” idiom, both personal and collective, in the momentary experience of reading.

One may also remember that *Your Name Here* is the title of a collection of poems published by John Ashbery in 2000. Peter Gizzi is using another poet’s title to extend an invitation which is not only his but also one of his personal and poetic friend’s, thus sketching the beginning of a poetic community in the act of reading. Peter Gizzi’s lyricism is a poetic system based

on generosity and exchange, as the last few words above show: “if you found me.” The semantic and temporal ambiguity of the verb allows for different interpretations: you have found me, you are constructing me (*fundare*), you are melting me (*funderere*). Finding, building, pouring myself into a new mold: all this is implied in Peter Gizzi’s “offrande lyrique”; all this, of course, provided we accept the poet’s invitation. Then and only then will we be able to say “we found each other” in the poem.

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