

INTERVIEW WITH PETER GIZZI IN RAIN TAXI (2003)

by Aaron Kunin

In *Three Poems*, John Ashbery distinguishes between two procedures for determining what goes into a poem: there's the one he's going to follow, "putting all down," and then there's the "other, truer way" which is "leaving out." Peter Gizzi has sometimes made poems by subtracting from what's already in the world—and in so doing has proved definitively that erasure can leave behind terribly beautiful evidence—but recently, Gizzi has been more interested in including as much as possible: cultural artifacts, unanswered questions, as well as mistakes, deletions, and false starts.

In his remarkable new collection, *Some Values of Landscape and Weather* (Wesleyan University Press), the palate Gizzi uses to depict this surfeit is vivid and strange, and color itself is a transient event, not fully embodied in objects. Human hair can be green, a month can be orange (and "October's crossing-guard orange" is only one of Gizzi's "odd oranges"), and "something/ particular to blue" can happen without being objectified as a surface. This shifting, Technicolor landscape is haunted by textuality: the "wilderness" includes Dante's dark wood and Baudelaire's forest of symbols; the name "Hawthorne" is shared by a "thorny Old World shrub" and a "U.S. novelist and short story writer"; even the bottoms of lakes seem to be lined with books. "'Here are my flowers,' / What do they smell like? 'Paper.'" In order to appear in a poem, a flower has to be converted into paper—especially if it's a flower embedded in a quotation from Jim Jarmusch's film *Dead Man*.

Like Jarmusch, Gizzi frequently puts a dead person at the center of his fictions: his "A History of the Lyric" is written under the ominous rubric "Forensics," and one of the voices of the dead remarks that "every thing is poetry here." That line is both an acknowledgment that Gizzi's poems are completely written—they do not include any materials that have not been worked over—and an acknowledgment of how much is lost through the conversion of the world into poetry. —AK

AARON KUNIN: Let's talk about the word "if," a key word in the new book.

PETER GIZZI: It's a good word, easy to spell. I guess I might say "if," the conditional, allows for generative thought and doubt at the same time. My poem "Chateau If" is a love poem, and it's also a prison: *Chateau d'If*, in the Marseille Harbor. That poem was a gift, it just came. I was in Provence, the land of troubadour poetry. I wanted to somehow relate or react to that tradition and a prison seemed to be the perfect vehicle, given the conceit of so many sonnets and love poems. I saw the prison, I saw the title.

AK: At the end of "In the Garden," you have a line: "if leaf beauty,/ if cloud beauty, if ideas of relation."

PG: Which is actually a transposition of titles from the fifth book of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*: "Of Leaf Beauty, Of Cloud Beauty, Of Ideas of Relation."

By the way, I am still writing "if" poems--I thought I'd had my fill of the word in my new book but they keep coming. I am taken by the anaphora and the iteration of the repeated questions. I have always used questions in my poetry and at the moment I am just going with it. Though I think repetition should be transformative rather than simply a sound pattern. The repeated words and phrases should build and evolve. I never want the sound to be separated from the emotion carrying the phrase, the purpose of the sound.

AK: Your poems often propose variant readings.

PG: I am fascinated by that. It's almost like a somatic representation of how we stumble and come to order, collect ourselves. I'm allowing the accident to occur, the revision to occur within the poem, because half of what I know I know by accident.

I want a poem to tumble down the page. I want the thought to swerve, indicate, and I want it to be open, to indicate something else and something else. I often cut things when I revise to leave the thought moving, just glancing. And the idea of the ending—the final note of the poem should recapitulate but also leave it open. Just like a title behaves to push the thought and have it slide in a further way.

I just watched *The Marriage of Maria Braun* for the first time in 15 years. Fassbinder will have a scene that's completely filled with emotion, and the emotion is vexed—it's erotic and angry, it's erotic and fearful, it's greed or it's sorrow—two things playing against each other,

always set within a political and historical context. And then he'll cut the scene just before it reaches any resolution, and you come to the next scene, but all of the unresolved feeling of the scene before bleeds into it. It's there as a kind of ghost-image. The tension just keeps building, and that subtext, or maybe the real content of the film, is happening by cutting before it comes to any kind of closure. And I believe that lines of poetry behave in a similar way.

AK: You rarely see montage happen in that Eisensteinian sense—putting two things together to derive some third thing that isn't at all obvious.

PG: I feel, when I'm watching a great film, it behaves the way poems behave. Structurally film is closer to poetry than it is to narrative art. Perhaps it's the compression of time, and that it's so incredibly emotive, and the experience is direct—images, like music, go directly into the body through the neo-cortex—it's a direct transmission. When poems are true, they do that.

I find O'Hara's veneration of film in his 1959 manifesto "Personism"—"only Whitman and Crane and Williams, of the American poets, are better than the movies"—makes particular sense in relation to Jonathan Rosenbaum's cataloguing of Godard's innovative practices (including "jump cuts, employment of direct sound and interview formats, fractured story lines, references to other films, freewheeling uses of pop culture, and essayistic digressions"). Doesn't this list describe the way poets as disparate as O'Hara, Ashbery, Brathwaite, Spicer, Reznikoff, Marianne Moore, Adrienne Rich, Crane, and Williams, for example, use parataxis, onomatopoeia, ethnographic reportage, narrative disjunction, intertextuality, and pop, sometimes all in a single poem? I think poets are attracted to film because of the flexible quality of the medium, the speed, the scale.

And William Carlos Williams's "no ideas but in things" is a good place to begin when talking about the nature of images in both poetry and film. I am more interested in "things" than in images. When one composes, an image becomes a thing, an artifact. After all, light is material; sound is sculptural. This is one way to account for the sense of presence one experiences in good film and poetry. Fassbinder quotes Douglas Sirk as saying "you can't make films about something, you can only make films *with* something, with people, with light, with flowers, mirrors, with blood, with all these crazy things that make it worthwhile."

AK: In your poem "An Allegory of Doubt," there's a repeated dialogue tag ("she said"), but it's

hard to say whether it's looking ahead to the next lines or back to the previous lines.

PG: That's great when that happens. Then you've caught something alive, in its turn.

The title "Allegory of Doubt" actually comes from a Giacomo Balla painting, a portrait of his wife from the early 20's after his futurist period. It might be his greatest painting—it depicts an adult woman's face in motion, moving upward, turning up, framed in black. It's absolutely stunning, because it mixes his early allegorical painting with the speed and motion of his futurist work.

My poem is not really an ekphrastic poem—I mean I'm looking at it, but I'm not writing what's there, I'm writing what happens to me, what I receive, at the moment of looking. I'd like to narrate the experience of reception, not the thing itself. And I think that is the thing itself, finally: what it does to us. Also, how it affects memory.

AK: In "Plain Song," the title seems to refuse polyvocality. Plain implies monotony—everyone would be saying the same thing. But the poem doesn't seem to be working that way, because it's partitioning speech—"some" are saying this, and "others" are saying that.

PG: What happened was, I was in France, and I began to lose my English, and my French was not really great, so I was speaking in very simple words constantly in French or in English, so people could understand me. It made me think of Oppen talking about "the little words that I like so much, like tree, hill, and so on." It's true, they're very effective.

I think polyvocality is unavoidable. When I write, I write from the sum total of things that have made me: my loves, ideas, people I've known, teachers, the books I've read, the news, the things I've seen. The beauty of thought and/or emotion, the virtue of it, is to be able to present its field, to present the fact that it's actually in relation and living and part of something. If you can voice these things, if they can somehow be hinted at, suggested, or directly come in to speak for a moment and be part of the overall contrapuntal structure of song, then the thought is more comprehensive.

Now ask me something like what's my favorite color.

AK: Could we talk about color? Some of the poems seem to be about the actual colors of writing, like "Just a Little Green Untitled," which, now that I think about it, suggests that the

poem has a color but no title.

PG: It's my favorite color. What can I say? It's like the color of breath—it's not blue, it's green.

AK: Do you think of color as a formal category for poetry?

PG: I'd have to think about it, but it's a lovely idea. It reminds me of Spicer's letter to Duncan when he writes "we need a color wheel for sounds." I guess I prefer this notion of synaesthesia, which I was working with explicitly in a poem like "Etudes, Evidence, Or a Working Definition of the Sun Gear," but it performs throughout my work.

The title of *Some Values of Landscape and Weather* works in a couple ways. The operative word is "values," a word of relation as it applies to aesthetics, sound, economics, ethics, institutions. In the title it's plural because I'd like to activate all its various and purposeful meanings. In relation to your color question, in aesthetic values, we're talking about both pictorial coloration and the coloration of the voice in song—pitch, tone, etc. I hear the "some" in the title as an indeterminate quantity as well as the homonym "sum" as in "the sum value of x is x." And I like the play between the relation of indeterminate quantities and totalities, aesthetics and politics, etc.

AK: In "Etudes," you say that "Place is constant work." The poem isn't an aspect of the place; it's the work you're doing, the poem you're writing, the sounds you make, that's creating the place.

PG: I think that's true. The British poet J.H. Prynne once said to me that I have a real penchant for the exclamatory "O." For me, it's the idea that when the poet enunciates the "O"—the grieving vowel—a world is constituted within the sound. I am equally interested in the doubleness or the exhaustion inherent in archaic poetic gestures. To speak the present as well as the depth of time and tradition.

Also, I began the "Etudes" poem when I was in Marseille, where the past is always visibly haunting the present: you see a building that begins in the first century, the second floor is from the 13th century, and the third floor is from the 20th century—some incredible piece of architectural genius. Everywhere you look, the Modernist notion of parataxis or collage surrounds you—it's obvious, and just kind of great that way. And, of course, there are always

structures being worked on. Wherever you go, there's no vista where there's not some crane or some team of people rebuilding something. People are actually repairing the view.

AK: Many of your poems seem to be spoken by someone who's already dead.

PG: That's the astonishing thing about poetry, the way the living and the dead are blurred. Poets like Dante or Stevens are just as immediate to me as someone who's writing today. The idea of speaking just next to something, to something that's just gone, or *for* something that's just gone, doesn't seem that strange to me. Also, I love the way 19th-century American literature accommodates death and mortality; think of Melville, Hawthorne, Dickinson, Emerson, and especially Lincoln. That sense of loss as a wilderness, borderless, everywhere at the periphery. It's part of being here and knowing that we're not here forever. That's why poetry is a lament, and at the same time it doesn't have to be "boo-hoo." We have so much information technology, and so many ways of capturing and recording and preserving, and yet, still, it doesn't really rescue or save anything. We just know—the technology has let us know—how much has been lost.

A simpler answer would be that I feel dead because everything I believe in seems to have no value in the culture at large.

AK: At a reading, you mentioned the book was originally going to have an epigraph from Scorsese's film *Bringing Out the Dead*: "There were times when my hands moved with a speed and skill beyond me."

PG: It's from the voiceover of the failed paramedic (Nicolas Cage). I thought that was a good way to talk about writing. Writing is a form of rescue, in the sense that you can bring together sensibilities, perspectives, things, nouns, intertextual references to things that are important to you; you can activate a syntax and a vocabulary that will deploy them in some way and give them life.

The reason I took it out was because most of these poems were written before September 11, 2001, and it no longer seemed appropriate—I didn't want to draw that much attention to it, or bring it down to that single meaning.

AK: What's being rescued? Are you performing an act of rescue that other people might be watching? Or are you creating a space in which other people might have the experience of rescuing or being rescued?

PG: Both, I guess. I'd like them to have the experience, and understand that that's what they do when they speak, that's what they do when they relate, when they read. I'd like to, somehow enact that. But who or what, that's hard to say. Like in "Revival," all these book titles and movie titles are coming and going. I remember one person who read it earlier said, "You know, this doesn't make any sense if you don't put the titles in italics or quotation marks. It's gonna look just like a typo." I don't want it to be in italics or quotation marks; I want it to be a title on its way to being lost.

That's the simple version of what's being rescued. A more complicated answer would be: every once in a while I have this experience when I'm writing that when something's completed, when the voice is constituted in a certain way, when the valence is operating at a certain frequency, there's this kind of presence—it's like what I've made, what the poem has allowed for, is a reader. I would like the poems to create some type of threshold of a presence. That's how the lyric behaves, or at least how my poetry behaves. It's like breath on a mirror. It's real. We see it. It's an apparition: it's material.

AK: "A speed and skill beyond me" suggests both a speed that's personal, that belongs to you, and then one that comes from outside you. Another image of speed, almost a condition of vision in your poems, is the car.

PG: Is that true?

AK: There are a few inset images of cars in this book, but more often things are seen through a windshield, or seen while in motion.

PG: I guess it's just a fact of my daily life: I'm an American, had a car all my life, always wanted a car, and we read and see things from the vantage point of the forms we inherit. Things are always in motion, flux, seen at a glance, seen in passing. One manifestation of speed is the fact that what was once called allegory is now something like "air," it is everywhere, we are

constantly witnessing ourselves on TV, in movies, in mirrored windows of storefronts, in magazines and newspapers. We double and multiply. We recognize and regulate and reposition ourselves, endlessly flipping from one source to another. There's no reason to exclude this in favor of some kind of static experience of the world. Why should I posit some kind of thought that's etched in stone?