

Interview with Daniel Kane about the poem “Chateau If” for Teacher’s and Writer’s (2000)

First the Poem:

FIN AMOR

Usage is more powerful than reason.
—Castiglione, *The Courtier*

Château If

If love if then if now if the flowers of if the conditional if of arrows
the condition of if
if to say light to inhabit light if to speak if to live, so
if to say it is you if love is if your form is if your waist that pictures
the fluted stem if lavender
if in this field
if I were to say hummingbird it might behave as an adjective here
if not if the heart’s a flutter if nerves map a city if a city on fire
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
if a creature if what you say if only to embroider—a city that
overtakes the city I write.

DANIEL KANE: What purpose does Castiglione's epigraph serve here? How do you interpret it in the context of the poem?

PETER GIZZI: The epigraph for the series comes from Baldassare Castiglione’s *The Courtier*, a 16th century primer on virtue and manners. But to answer your question, well, I would hope that for a poetics of eros the epigraph is pretty straightforward, i.e. actions speak louder than words! Though in this context usage is also about grammar or the power of syntax. So the “action” here is primarily one of language.

At any rate, I found myself in Marseille the fall of 1999 and because I was in the land of Amors I wanted to respond to this tradition in some way. The poem “Chateau If” is the first poem of a larger series entitled “Fin Amor.” The title of the series derives from the name of Bernart de Ventadorn’s practice of trobar: *fin’amors* (pure love). And in keeping with the

troubadour tradition this series of poems is also always about poetry. Because I was in Ventadorn's region at the turn of 2000 I felt by dropping the apostrophe one could read it both ways: *fin*, as in pure or fine, and *fin*, as in the end. All this probably more than you wanted to know.

DK: That is a lot of historical information! Since this interview is designed for teachers of creative writing, what advice might you give a teacher who's interested in teaching this poem, but who is perhaps intimidated or unfamiliar with the references you just provided us with? That is, what elements in this poem might be promoted as sources of pleasure outside historical context?

PG: Oops! Well, William Carlos Williams once wrote: "If it ain't a pleasure, it ain't a poem." And then there's Creeley's revision: "If it isn't fun, don't do it." I guess the pleasure for me in writing this poem is the sense of possibility that can be created through the repeated use of the conditional or the particular pleasures I take in doubt. Doubt is always generative for me, and here I found that I could revise each statement by interrupting it with a further complication. So instead of completing any single, definitive statement, I chose to keep the movement open and tumbling forward by using a series of conditional phrases. I think the only grammatically complete unit in the poem is "if I were to say hummingbird it might behave as an adjective here," and doubt is re-introduced in the middle of the line by using the word "might."

In teaching I sometimes ask students to edit by addition; that is to say, to take one of their lines that works and repeat, retranslate, or add to it. To somehow extend the meaning in the poem by going deeper into a single thought rather than moving out laterally.

DK: You've sure got a lot of "if"s here! Does the repeated word at the beginning of the lines count as anaphora, and, if so, might you discuss your attitude here towards repetition - that is, what repetition does to a poem and a poem's reader?

PG: To begin with, the title "Chateau If" is a mishearing of the name of the actual castle, then prison, built in 1524 in the Marseille harbor, *Chateau d'If*. It was made famous in Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*. At any rate, I heard it as "if." Lester Bangs wrote: "It always begins in that glorious "mistake." And it just struck me as an ideal word on which to build a conditional argument of "romance" or to begin to posit a discourse on desire and its powers of location and displacement on the imagination. The repetition of "if" seemed a natural way to capture or underscore the flexibility of lyric time—as a kind of active subjunctive, something present and real that is also something possible.

DK: What do you mean by "the flexibility of lyric time?" Are you suggesting that the lyric—the poem—might ideally transcend its cultural and historical moment?

PG: Good question, and a large one. I wouldn't use the word "transcends." For me, the key word is "flexibility" which doesn't necessarily imply transcendence. When a poem is good, it also exists beyond its moment. The lyric tradition, as we know it, has been around for 4,000 years since the Sumerians, and a device like anaphora, among others, goes back to some of the earliest examples. In fact, one could argue almost anything we consider innovative in contemporary poetry has its precedent in this vast tradition. So while the immediate context—or even the content—of a poem changes, the sounds it makes and the way it makes them are not bound only to its historical moment. I've always loved Dickinson's observation that "This world is not conclusion, a species stands beyond, invisible as music but positive as sound" as a nice way to think about tradition and generation within a larger sequence of lyric expression.

DK: How would you characterize the form of this poem? Did you follow any models?

PG: While I was there in Marsielle it happened I had brought some tapes I had made from a radio program broadcast from Salinas, California. It is a request show mostly between inmates at Soledad and the community around the prisoners. It is the most amazing and heartbreaking show. The DJ's name, by the way, is Ed the Cruiser! Songs are sent into the inmates and out to their loved ones as dedications on anniversaries, birthdays, etc. But the songs are all primarily 60's soul songs. So instantly it is obvious that the inmates have been inside for a really long time. But the songs remain implacable, transformative, fresh, and moving. This element of the song is what we carry, and the song or the poem is the means to broadcast this enduring and necessary frequency, particularly in the midst of deprivation, so a once ebullient pop song acquires an indelible element of elegy. And I wouldn't call the solace of the song merely nostalgic or sentimental. But powerful and necessary in its ability to be effective. It disrupts the clock and engages in a larger order of duration within the body within the mind, hence "soul."

The repetition of "if" in my poem is my attempt to transpose what I was hearing Gene Chandler, or Percy Sledge, or Aretha Franklin, or Van Morrison doing with their voices—what they can do with the song, the *carmen perpetuum*, and still make it their own. For instance see "r-e-s-p-e-c-t" from Aretha for "m-y-s-e-l-f" in my poem.

For me this idea of transposition from a singing voice to a poem, or from visual culture into language (reading painting, film, architecture) is rich with possibility. I like the flexible nature of composition and improvisation. I have another series in my manuscript which behaves as a transposition of a voice entitled "Masters of the Cante Jondo."

DK: What's the "Masters of the Cante Jondo" all about? And, secondly, your notion of "transposition from a singing voice to a poem, or from visual culture into language" is especially interesting. Might a student of poetry, a beginning poet, find in other genres sources of inspiration from which to create his or her own poetry? Do you have any models or ways of teaching beginning writers how to access other art-works for use in poems?

PG: To answer your first question, the title comes from a CD anthology of classic flamenco recordings from the 1920s and 30s. I guess it's an Andalusian version of Harry Smith's Folkways anthology. My poem was responding in particular to the voice of Niña de la Puebla. Her voice takes the top of my head off. Part of its power is that it is at once ancient and incredibly present. When you hear her voice it's like a baptism. You're changed. I don't mean that the poem is addressed to her, but her voice challenged me to try to do in a poem what she does in song. My interest in classic flamenco came out of my work on Spicer and his interest in Lorca.

Both music and visual art, especially painting and film, have always been generative for my poetry. I think if poetry is to thrive in its present it needs to be open to the developments and the moves and the vocabularies of other media. This goes both ways. The language of film as we know it exists because of the syntax and form of poetry. In fact, I would say that film as an art form is much closer to poetry than to fiction.

As for teaching, particularly beginning writers, I find they often feel compelled to write about themselves but don't have the means—or form—through which to do it. So I suggest that they do an assignment in *ekphrasis*; that is, I have them find a painter or filmmaker whose work speaks to them and ask them to look at that work deeply and write what they see. I ask them to be concrete in their word choices. For many of them this type of writing is a bit of a revelation because they begin to see that how they read a work of art has everything to do with who they are. So by focusing on material outside themselves, they not only disclose something particular about that work of art but they also reveal something of themselves *to* themselves in the process.

DK: Your poem reminded me a little bit of the end of Joyce's *Ulysses*, where Molly Bloom ecstatically repeats the word "Yes" as she succumbs to a sexual embrace. Were you thinking of this at all as you were writing the poem?

PG: I hadn't thought of it but it is interesting you mention Joyce. He was, after all, interested in low and high diction and form and the depth of language and the time signatures sewn into their sounds. So was Spicer. But hey, that's poetry. That's what poetry does. It makes sound

real. Makes language signify the body that is always beside us, with us, in our daily passage. I prefer Beckett's "A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine." But I am also interested in the narrative that emotive language creates. It needn't be a story per se but the story of where we go when we are in the moment of listening or when reading a painting in the moment of seeing—which is why I am thinking of calling my new book *In Song & Story*—I am interested in this activity of depicting where we go when we are engaged in this moment of reception.