

Singing the Song from the Outside:

Peter Gizzi's *Outernationale*

Reviewed by Stephen Collis

Every time I think the lyric is dead, it lifts itself up again, it whispers “you” at me, stuttering its sonic stuff. Why can’t it die? The lyric, it seems, is one of the few modes left to the poem-as-poem (despite how many times I try to convince myself otherwise, despite how dominant, within the poetic field, the lyric has been—for decades). The epic, mock-epic, long narrative poem is gone—the poem’s work here replaced by the improved narrative technologies of the novel and film. The ballad, as a viable mode, has also slipped from poetry’s perch, taken over by popular music (as it always was some relative of popular music). Poets tend now to write some version of the lyric, or, if they are self-consciously “avant-garde,” some version of the procedural poem. (Perhaps I’m being too absolute, too dogmatic—but I’ll pretend dogmatism, for the time being at least). What, you say (you, dear reader I am apostrophically addressing)—everything lyric or procedure? It’s an easy divide to map: the lyric presupposes a self who sees, feels, experiences, thinks and reports; the procedural poem does away with the same, excising the perceiving subject by making the procedure the motor of the poem.

Now clearly not all “avant-garde” (the word is problematic but I will use it for now) poems are procedural poems; there are avant-garde lyrics, which often take the form of serial poems (essentially extended lyrics or linked assemblages of lyric fragments). The avant-garde lyric, if one can be permitted to speak of such, often makes the subject the *subject* of the poem: it is self-investigative, and aware that the subject speaking the poem is a pose, a linguistic mechanism, a tool. The lyric unfolds amidst the strangeness of language—the strangeness of being *in* language.

I should apologize for this long opening digression, but I want to discuss the lyric and Peter Gizzi’s new collection, *The Outernationale*, which—much as his previous book, *Some Values of Landscape and Weather* (2003)—strikes a curious pose in the lyric landscape. Exactly what a Gizzi lyric does is in many ways made clear to me by the new book. Another way of talking about the two different lyric strains this stumbling prolusion has been attempting to outline would be to note that some lyrics are “spoken” seemingly from “within” the lyric subject (out of experience/feeling/confession) while others—though still possibly employing the lyric I—seem to be “spoken” from “without”—from a disembodied position simultaneously outside and inside the subject.

The play of Gizzi’s title—not the *Internationale* but the *Outernationale*—directs us towards this reading of the lyric-from-without. Not an inter space (the traditional address, “I” talking to “you”), nor an inner one (self-reflection, confession), but an *outer* space—a “practice of the outside,” to invoke the important precedence, for Gizzi’s poetics, of Spicer and Blaser.

[Poetry] as coming from the outside rather than from the inside
(Spicer, qtd in Blaser, “Practice of the Outside”).

A reopened language lets the unknown, the Other, the outside in again

as a voice in the language (Blaser, “Practice”).

The “*outside*...as a voice *in* the language.” In Gizzi’s *Outernationale*, the self’s separation from itself—the lyric-from-without—is always present: “There is my body and the idea of my body”—“I am a bridge I am standing on.” I am I, but I am also a figure in a poem, who I am watching—from without.

The collection opens with a serial poem, “A Panic That Can Still Come Upon Me,” which takes its title from “a ‘salvage’ work by Jess”—and from Robert Duncan’s essay “The Truth and Life of Myth,” where the “panic” has to do with that moment in the “world of saying and telling” when “the word no longer protects.” What the word might protect one from, in Duncan, is complex, but it clearly has to do with the outside, and with knowledge (the child, and the poet, Duncan tells us, prefer the *sound* to the *sense* of words). Duncan cites Plato’s caution against the poetics of the outside:

“He who listens to her,” Plato says—he speaks here of Poetry—“fearing for the safety of the city which is within him, should be on his guard against her seductions and make our words [the words of philosophy] his law.”

The moment of poetry can come on as a sort of “panic” (Duncan would note the presence of the god Pan in the word), as it moves from the outside (“Poetry,” to whom the poet may “listen”), in. Much of this comes to bear on Gizzi’s use of the conditional “if” at the beginning of his book.

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 thought [...]

The conditional leaves us in a dependent state—awaiting outside circumstances to make the moment of “saying and telling” possible. The invocation of Zeno, whose paradoxes were designed to refute the idea of motion, is also instructive. Zeno famously used the image of an arrow in flight to argue that, once time is segmented into individual moments, within each moment that flying arrow will occupy a particular position, in which it is—momentarily—still. Thus motion is an illusion, and time merely a series of frozen moments.

The serial poem is thus the ideal form for “Zeno’s thought”—especially in Blaser’s description of it as “a series of rooms where the lights go on and off.” The poem—whether lyric or lyric fragment in a series—is a segment of time, dependent upon certain conditions (that “I” happen to be “calling aloud,” that “I” feel myself about to “break into pieces of glitter,” that I hear “tires

whine on wet pavement”)—a moment (or series of moments) when the lyric voice can lift itself amidst the matter of words and speak its conditions.

The repeated “ifs” stage a constant and fundamental uncertainty—a Keatsean negative capability or Duncanean “adventure of not knowing”—it is, as Spicer writes of the serial poem, necessarily a matter of “not knowing what the hell you’re doing,” or as Gizzi puts it in “Panic,” “There are things larger than understanding.”

To be conditional, dependent, potential—to be uncertain, filled with doubt—to be at one remove from oneself (the remove of the page, the poem), so that one becomes a stranger to oneself, outside oneself—

I heard my name
one day from the road.
It startled me, that alias
bringing me inside

—this is the “Panic” that triggers, or is triggered by, the lyric-from-without. And how different is the characterization of Gizzi’s moment of composition from Wordsworth’s “recollection in tranquility,” or even Duncan’s “Often I am permitted to return to a meadow.” I cannot help but think Gizzi’s “Panic” is the more accurate description of the poet’s state of mind in our present time of war (“Homer’s Anger”), surveillance (“A Telescope Protects its View”) and collapse (“From Here Laughter Sounds like Crying”—to site other titles in Gizzi’s book). Where Gizzi takes us is indeed into that frantic moment of composing the poem/self as a fraught complex in a “Bipolaroid” world (to site yet another poem’s title). The hope he holds out—from his inside/outside position (vis-à-vis the lyric) is the possibility of us all singing—if not the “Internationale”—then a simultaneity of “Outernationales.” If the “if’s” of “A Panic” set off a series of semi-paradoxes, the entire book weaves and unweaves a space of tentative joining that is both “an idea of time” (as he writes in the poem “Saturday and its Festooned Potential”) and “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 a poem.

Are we ourselves or another? Are we inside the poem (and thus “complete”) or still outside the poem (in the process of “becoming” the voice in the poem)?

The uncertainties of the lyric-from-without are often spoken from a position amongst the dead. Dickinson, a great practitioner of the lyric-from-without, so often has her speaker considering flies, the direction of her carriage, or her master’s life from just beyond the veil. So Gizzi, the contemporary inhabitant of Amherst, has his speaker, late in *The Outernationale*, ask “Why can’t I just admit / I’m dead.” Gizzi has a good explanation, here, in his afterword to Spicer’s Vancouver Lectures:

Since poets write backwards in response to their deceased poetic predecessors and forward to the eventual readers of their poems, they exist inevitably outside of their own time even as they reflect or embody it [...The poem's] time is outside time.

The argument is, in some senses, still with Zeno (is there one—the poetic self—and no movement—the stillness of the lyric urn—or is there plurality—“the crowd in the mind”—and movement between past and present, the self and others?). But it is also one about the “social” life of poems—their existence as “responses” to dead “poetic predecessors.” So *The Outernational* begins with Duncan’s “Panic,” and moves on through a host of others, including Whitman, in the poem “Stung.”

A child I became a question
sitting on the grass.
To be told how lucky I am.
An open field.
This corporeal expanse
was a body too [...].

Whitman’s child comes to ask the poet “what is the grass,” and the poet’s song is his answer: the grass is a figure of the multitude, the (idealized) democratic plurality of America. As I have tried to indicate, one problem the lyric-from-without comes to address is that of the plural (which Zeno sought to deny, along with movement)—that the “I” is one only midst many—that we need there to be more than one, to consider one. So the poem spoken from the outside is, in “Stung,” “standing outside in the grass,” in the plural. But such a position—being outside the lyric, in the multitude, but still at once *in* the lyric, apostrophizing—is tenuous and uncertain at best.

To be and not to understand.
To understand nothing
and be content
to watch light against
leaf-shadowed ground.
To accept the ground.
To go to it as a question.

In Whitman’s “Song” the child’s question about the grass is given a multiplicity of answers. In Gizzi’s poetry, we have a multiplicity of propositional “if’s” to consider as we ponder how it is

To be inside this thing,
outside in the grass place,
out in the day
inside another thing.

The outside and inside “things” here relate to bodies—the individual body and the body politic (“This corporeal expanse / was a body too”)—and they interpenetrate. In the first iteration of the

book's two title poems, where Whitmanic "leaves" still "arch over everything / they are so democratic," the inside/outside space becomes that of a ballpark (with its "sand" and "grass"). The speaker's positionality is unclear: is he "out into the day," noting the details of "breeze-shaken / wrappers," or simply watching "TV" as "the faces in the stands echo / and bounce far into the field"? However that may be, the speaker's function is a little more clear: to be "our viewer"—the focalization of the crowd at the park. This collective speaker given single voice (which I think lies at the heart of the mechanism of the lyric-from-without) is troubled by the very issue of the relation between the singular and the plural, wondering "How can I answer / not to inhibit / any single point in this ray?" The problem is accentuated by the alienating forces of power (the "statehouse" and the "administration / of money") and commodification (the "little sheen of products"). The "hopes and suspense" the multitude watching the game projected onto the "runner rounding 2nd" may not be the most authentic experience of collectivity, but "in a world of navigable / foreshortening emotional registers," it may be all that we can expect. The paradoxical nature of the experience—that, collectively, we have given our collectivity up to the spectacle—is very much the matter for Gizzi's speaker.

We find purpose
in the game and together,
this crucial passage given flight
when detail disappears into a crowd
that too quickly invested
and then discarded its power.

Tellingly the poem ends with a question: "when I asked what happened / I meant what happened to us?"

One way the question of "what happened to us" plays out is in terms of the "guest-host relationship," as Gizzi writes in "That's Life." The relationship between self and others is "bigger than a house, older / than cold planets in space." It is a fundamental, ontological condition of bodies that they exist amidst other bodies; the speaker here, attempting to console, advises we "Look straight into their impermanent flash, / the nervous-system tic of their talk." The "tick-tock" of time chimes here again—and it is indeed the "impermanence" of our bodies that we share, the "holes" inside them, the physical need to "Embrace them and have a meal."

The guest-host relationship of course sits at the heart of Homer's ethics (if one can speak of such); thus, it is also situated at the opening of Gizzi's poem "Homer's Anger" (another of *The Outernationale's* several serial poems):

I see you and hear you
and that is the beginning of a poem.

The poet-host welcomes the addressee-guest in a simple schematic of the lyric: "I" responding to "you" makes "a poem." But read in the context of the "practice of the outside" and the guest-host relationship, the poem becomes something "bigger than a house," into which multitudes are, potentially, welcomed. I find it significant, too, that we are privy here to "Homer's Anger"—not Achilles, whose anger the *Iliad* opens with. It is the anger of the poet at "the headlines" and "the

news,” the “Human damage” that is “beginning / to consume the present.” One does not have to look far to find the sources of the poet’s anger—war, terror, destruction form the substance of dailyness, and the particulars barely need to be named. Keeping “One eye” on the lookout “for police” and the other “for waves and motion,” Gizzi’s speaker steers straight into the gears of global alienation, throwing the ideological mask off the war on terror.

Loneliness is structural after all,
you have to really come with us

across the page, and if we are
indeed, alone together,

mighty are the numbers
drifting out there.

Alienation (“loneliness”) may indeed be “structural” (we are, after all, all supposed to be autonomous actors in the global market)—but Gizzi sees the poet’s role as one of “writing about hope” (as he has it in the second title poem), so he idealizes the “page” as a potential place of meeting “alone together” (think of readers simultaneously in isolation and, in reading another’s text, in communion). If such a state of being at once “alone” and “together” is tenable, then indeed “mighty are the numbers.” The sadness, however, is that the possibility of communion remains that, a possibility, a conditional “if” that can ring somewhat hollowly under present conditions (where the structure of insecurity keeps us alienated isolatos). At the close of “Homer’s Anger” the speaker is still “moving towards you”—outside, looking in—but desiring to be there.

The second “Outernationale” poem is not a reprisal of the first, but it does suggest the way the individual poems form linkages between each other, as they are formally “alone together” between the boards of the book. Not a serial poem like the other longer sequences in *The Outernationale*, this poem is a lyric sustained for 11 pages, and returns us to many of themes already touched upon. The conditional and tentative speaking of the lyric-from-without is re-focused upon as a fact, in part, of the strange materiality of language, where “So much depends upon” the variability of “x” (the uncertain content of a speech that is only really aware that it *is*, in fact, a speaking—from somewhere, to someone). The body is also brought back into focus, described here as “coming to, inside / this wooden structure / -archy, -ology, -ocracy.” The body is one of the conditions of speech and the poem—and it is significant that Gizzi places this body in the “wooden structure” of ideology (a sort of wooden-horse version of hegemony)—those hyper-ideological words shadowed forth here only in their suffixes. The fragmented suffixes in fact run throughout the poem as a sort of refrain, indicating once again the open possibility of language: the ends of words held out as possible variants, multiple possible conclusions to all those phrases that have begun “If...”

The lyric-from-without peers into its place within the present world with both hope and skepticism. It sees that “the new poverty is just / like the old poverty” and, ironically, wonders “Whoever said / absolute powerlessness / corrupts absolutely?” But it also clings to a sort of idealism—or at least, a hope that alternatives are still possible.

If we could say
the world has changed,
it has changed. If we say
the world is the same
then so it is.

This focus on the power of “saying” is where Gizzi works a social lyric, which the lyric-from-without, aware of the dangers hidden within the “wooden structures” of ideology and the interpolated self, tends towards. Singing an “Outernationale,” standing outside time to critique “Zeno’s thought” (that, in part, change is impossible, history has ended, and “there are no alternatives”), Gizzi’s speaker (echoing Dickinson) claims—

I’m nobody
for a change
I take the form
of everyone waiting

Here, in the collection’s concluding poem, Dickinson’s “nobodies” realize they are a plurality, “alone together,” awaiting “change.” The landscape in which they “wait” is “groundless,” but at the same time very American—a place “so feeling of Lincoln,” where “Melville has bled / into the local runoff.” In this space—alone and together, groundless and local—embodied nobodies give vent to a sort of utopian lament and hope “in the face of violence.”

I want my house
to burn
and build from
nowhere
just there

Everything, ultimately, is contradiction—but then our present world is built out of just such contradictions, and ever poet, and every utopian, knows that in order to build, we must destroy—just as utopia, to have any “place” at all, must be at once “groundless” (ideal and imaginal) and “local” (locatable).

I want to conclude by glancing, briefly, at the lyric in its “native habitat”: the collection of short poems. These books have for a long time now been the norm, and are churned out regularly by the creative writing industry. It is a sort of piece work that allows the poet to accumulate discrete works that—by sheer accretion—eventually assume the form of a “book.” These are typically the books we hear most about, as they are generally published by the larger presses and win the major awards and prizes. Gizzi’s books have the appearance of being such accumulated texts, but appearances can be deceiving.

Placing *The Outernationale* beside Gizzi’s last book, *Some Values of Landscape and Weather*, highlights the structuring of his “collections” and suggests the form of an unfolding “project” (rather than random collection of accumulated lyrics). Both books divide internally into sections

(nothing new here), and both alternate longer and shorter works (again, more or less de rigueur for the typical lyric collection). Looking closer, both books open with serial poems structured by sub-titled sections, and both of these poems introduce the conditional “if,” which carries through the collections—as technique and theme. Both books also position their speakers “outside,” amongst the dead (“I think of you more often now that I’m dead,” Gizzi writes in *Some Values*). Gizzi’s concerns and his vision of the lyric (as something spoken from the outside) are consistent. His “project”—across these two books so closely in dialogue with each other that they form virtual mirrors—is nothing less than a re-writing of the lyric itself. What we are being shown is that the lyric—like the self—is multiple, many-headed, a “crowd” of sub-genres, formal variations, and philosophical/political positions. My opening either/or ambit comes apart here, as the lyric fragments into the many-faceted modes it displays—self-expressive lyrics, confessional lyrics, observational lyrics, abstract lyrics (as I have suggested elsewhere), serial lyrics, lyrics-from-without. Gizzi’s excellence is to be found both in his expansion of our definition of the lyric, and in his flawless ear and sky rocket mind as he takes his particular version of the lyric onto the poetic highway to see what it can do. Whatever we want to call these poems, catching them in our critical nets, the ride is well worth the ticket.

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