

he should have. The discomfort induced by the translation conveys something of what the reader might feel if confronted with the true nastiness of fascist language, which was personal, intimate, and dehumanizing in its hatred. Yet it is important to understand that Thomas has erred: the United States and Germany have different histories, and their vocabularies of hatred cannot be simply equated.

In the twentieth century, countless writers have replaced these and other specific politics with universal stories of extremism or hatred. When the allegory speaks to a current conflict, this may call attention to the basic violence that rests beneath the particulars of a political discourse; this is certainly what Horváth wanted readers to understand about fascism. Yet because allegories enable writers to keep the ugliest language off their pages, in time the political stakes may become obscure. If we did not remember Nazism so vividly today, *Youth Without God* would be a closed book—it tells us nothing about where fascism happened, how it arose, or who it victimized, though Horváth, unlike his narrator, did have insight into these questions.

Similarly, political allegory allows the point of many works to become blunted. Only the most conservative or censorious Americans would object to *Animal Farm* or *Fahrenheit 451*. An accurate translation of *Youth Without God* might belong alongside these works or Arthur Koestler's more introspective and less read *Darkness at Noon*. One can imagine what a more successful and troublesome version of Horváth's book might have looked like. An obvious point of reference for an American reader is *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a book that also deals with the cruelty of the young, but has retained a broad power to offend. Huck continues to bother us because his moral sense sometimes rises above his racist language, and sometimes leads him to stoop in the most squalid ways. Horváth's teacher does not stoop, but by keeping his head in the clouds he denies us a clear view of his world.

Ben Merriman

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Peter Gizzi, *In Defense of Nothing: Selected Poems, 1987–2011*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014. 244pp. \$26.95

Peter Gizzi is a central figure in American poetry. He is the author, most recently, of *In Defense of Nothing*, a vital new selected that highlights almost twenty-five years of work. His earlier achievements include five volumes of poetry, editions of Jack Spicer's collected poetry (2008) and lectures (1998), *The Exact Change Yearbook* (1995), and the stunning journal *o-blek* (1987–1993). From 2007 to 2011, he was poetry editor at *The Nation* and,

in the mid-1990s, a student at University of Buffalo, where he studied with Robert Creeley, Susan Howe, and Charles Bernstein, and an extraordinary cohort of fellow students, including Juliana Spahr, Ben Friedlander, Jena Osman, Kristin Prevallet, Elizabeth Willis, Lisa Jarnot, and Pam Rehm, among many others.

An academic review would reckon with these facts. The selected would be an occasion to evaluate Gizzi's career up to this point and defend his status as a major or minor poet. It would also be an occasion to discuss his relation to two overlapping traditions—one, leading from the New American Poetry to Language writing, and the other, from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Wallace Stevens to John Ashbery. Such a review would also trace the impact of Gizzi's cohort at Buffalo and address a series of sociological questions: Does the cohort clarify the relationship between poetry and academia over the last twenty-five years? Does it illuminate the changing nature of literary communities? Is there such a thing as a Buffalo school?

But this is not an academic review—it is, instead, an assessment and appreciation of Gizzi's best work. His most compelling poems constantly shift perspective as they pursue new ways of understanding the world. The beautiful, mobilelike "Psalm" from *Periplum* (1992), his first collection, is an early example:

No one lives there

X and delirium
—barely wider

than a sun

How many greater

than ourselves
is air

Feed the candle

the gate

and your house

Line by line, the poem moves from a declaration of absence to an expression of abandon to a description of the air circulating within and between us. (Is X a drug or an act of negation or a secret destination—or all three?) As soon as Gizzi establishes a point of view, he dissolves it. We repeatedly lose

our place—and, in the process, discover and celebrate a world outside our everyday experience.

Gizzi's work after *Periplum* departs from this fragmentary style, but his basic concerns remain the same. The poems in *In Defense of Nothing* tack from landscapes to mental states to artworks to relationships, and back again. The title poem from *Some Values of Landscape and Weather* (2003), his third collection, captures his frenetic lyricism. The poem concludes:

Night coming on, goings to and fro
under a canopy of burning discs
and that twinkling bigness. It was all the time
happening. Here beneath
the shadow of branch and ballot.
Where else can you say
that to love the questions
you have to love the answers.
Outside, a transmission's whine
breaks our unmediated approach
to a brambled paradise.
What could we do now our gaze
had been altered, and constantly.
The shiny spot's decoy, sometimes
emotive, sometimes in bright digression.

This is a single, surreal scene: a street at twilight—or perhaps under a marquee's glare. Yet Gizzi refuses to commit to a single point of view. His statements are general. "Here beneath / the shadow of branch and ballot." "What could we do now our gaze / had been altered, and constantly." These lines describe modern life—not any particular experience of it.

An inventory of Gizzi's work reveals a range of tactics for escaping what Sharon Cameron calls, in an essay on Emerson, "the tyranny of self-enclosure." Anaphoric poems—such as the powerful "A Panic That Can Still Come upon Me" from *Outernational* (2007)—accumulate conditionals. That poem begins:

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 is humming

Ekphrastic poems—such as "Vincent, Homesick for the Land of Pictures,"

also from *Outernationale*—see the world through the eyes of another artist. “Vincent” opens:

Is this what you intended, Vincent
that we take our rest at the end of the grove
nestled into our portion beneath the bird’s migration
saying, who and how am I made better through struggle.
Or why am I I inside this empty arboretum
this inward spiral of whoopass and vision
the leafy vine twisting and choking the tree.

The poem submits to van Gogh’s experience of the world—and, eventually, its own act of submission. Its final 539 lines repeat the first 539, but in reverse order. The resulting mirror poem is at once vulnerable and masterly, willing to abandon itself to its own act of sympathetic identification. Other poems track the consciousness of a single speaker until the poems themselves (their momentum, their form) begin to determine the speaker’s consciousness. Others yet submit to the rhythms of song. Here is the opening of “Basement Song” from *Threshold Songs* (2011):

Out of the deep
I dreamt the mother.

How deep the mother
deep the basement

the body, odor of laundry
the soul of a bug.

The grass inside
the song stains me.

The mother stains me.

In the poem, Gizzi describes his interpellation by a series of influences—genes, dreams, memories, his mother, the poem’s own music. The self, here, is extraordinarily receptive—perforated by a world beyond its control.

I quote these poems at length to give a sense of Gizzi’s artistry. If you want to know whether to read *In Defense of Nothing*, read the inset quotations. They reveal the book’s openness, precision, and vitality.

Gizzi’s less successful poems employ many of the same tactics, but do not make any surprising discoveries. They are impressive and inert. In his long poems, the weakest moments are often the most metapoetic. Consider this passage from “Pierced,” from *Artificial Heart* (1998), a poem

that repeats the phrase “the heart of poetry is”:

The heart of poetry is an angry child
a decaying spider in a chain link fence
a rotten cushion at the bottom of a stream
springs busted out, fabric torn
a shooting gallery in the basement
the heart of poetry is a ripped sock
covering that wound, fresh with it

the actual bone is bone

I find it difficult to censure the poem: its defects reflect an absence—of an insight or an emotion. Gizzi’s catalog of metaphors, here, simply falls flat. When he abandons these metaphors, however, he redeems the poem: the line that ends the passage, “the actual bone is bone,” is astonishing.

Gizzi’s best work dominates *In Defense of Nothing*. But his weaker poems also contribute to the volume. Selected poems, after all, have two aims. They survey an author’s career and spotlight his or her strongest work. These aims almost always conflict: the survey dilutes (by including too much) and the spotlight misrepresents (by including too little). In Gizzi’s case, the conflict is an occasion to understand the development of an important poet at mid-career, and to begin, finally, an in-depth discussion about his place in literary history and the place of literary history in his work.

Joshua Kotin

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