

These Feelings of Futurelessness: Peter Gizzi's *Now It's Dark*

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DOI: 10.51865/JLSL.2022.03

Abstract

This essay examines Peter Gizzi's book *Now It's Dark* under various optics. To begin, the focus is on the book's intricate construction as an extended, dialogic work, rather than simply a collection of poems. Attention is paid to the complex structural links and divergences between the book's various sections, and how Gizzi deploys them to displace and complicate traditional elements of the lyric, not least lyric temporality. The analysis of temporality which follows also allows Gizzi's work to be placed in the context of important modernist and proto-modernist interlocutors, such as Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens. Special attention is devoted to how Gizzi's work can be seen to intervene in and deepen the unlikely dialogue between the latter two, by way of an investigation of Natalia Cecire's concept of 'contact' and Gizzi's own trope of auto-ethnography. To conclude, the essay examines how Gizzi's poetic working through of mourning, elegy and the problem of pastness links to our present historical moment more generally.

Keywords: *time, lyric, mourning, Wallace Stevens, Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams*

Thanatos, the death-plant in the skull
Grows wings and grows enormous.

Jack Spicer¹

[T]he beginning of culture is the burial of the dead

Peter Gizzi²

When now?

Samuel Beckett³

Now It's Dark is the title of Peter Gizzi's most recent book of poems, published in 2020. And to begin, I would like to pause at the word 'book' – more than any other of Gizzi's collections, this volume functions as a 'book' in Jack Spicer's sense, creating a network of dialogic 'co-responses' between both poems and the sections which surround them, in a manner which ensures that none of these poems are ever, as Spicer

¹ Jack Spicer, *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer*, ed. Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 378.

² Peter Gizzi, *A User's Guide to the Invisible World: Selected Interviews*, ed. and intr. Zoe Tuck, *Free Poetry*, Poetry and Poetics Series, vol. 2 (n. p., 2022), 20; available at <https://www.freepoetrypress.com/petergizzi>. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as *IW*, with page numbers in the text.

³ Samuel Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 291.

put it, 'by itself alone'.⁴ They are constantly talking to each other, in contact with an elsewhere that displaces their own sense of unity. This is made manifest by the complexity of the structure of the collection. It is divided into four sections, titled 'Lyric', 'Garland', 'Nocturne' and 'Coda', yet this act of naming is itself divided and intricate, for if the section 'Lyric' gathers together 20 poems which can plausibly be considered as individual 'lyrics', the other three section-titles are far less straightforward, as each of them contain only one single poem. That is to say, 'Garland' contains only the poem 'Marigold and Cable', while 'Nocturne' consists only of the poem 'The Ship of State', and the final 'Coda' is comprised only of the extended lyric 'From This End of Sadness'. For the last three sections, then, the use of titles differs drastically from the usual deployment of section-headings, in which is presented first the name of the totality and then the plural names of that totality's constituent parts. Rather, it is as if each of the three last sections had *two names*: the name it carries as an individual instance of poetry, and the name it carries as a moment within the book; as if, for example, 'The Ship of State' had a private nickname, which the book *Now It's Dark* uses to speak to it, and that this nickname is 'Nocturne'.

And this structure is made even more complicated by several additional factors. First of all, the last section is named 'Coda', and a coda is an element which presents a challenge to the notion of totality itself, when considered as an addendum tacked onto something which is somehow at once whole without the coda and yet also completed by it – a classic 'supplement' in Jacques Derrida's sense. Thus, 'Coda' means that if *Now It's Dark* is massively dialogic and dialectical, it does not add up to an easy whole. Similar to this is that each section works with a very different form of temporal logic. While 'Lyric' is the most familiar, feeling the most like a collection of discrete, separate, potentially movable parts, 'The Ship of State' is overwhelmingly sequential, being a prose poem broken into nine numbered consecutive sections. The 'Coda', that is, the poem 'From This End of Sadness', is a long but airy lyric, which would not be out of place in the book's first section. But in massive contrast to both of the above is the poem 'Marigold and Cable', a literally intricate poem with a brilliantly executed looping recursive structure, verbally mirroring the entangled stitching of the marigold garland which gives the poem its name. The flavour of this book as book can only be conveyed by pausing over the radical difference between the modes of 'Marigold and Cable' and 'Ship of State', as partially seen in these examples, though the cumulative effect of the former cannot be transmitted through a small excerpt. Still, these two segments of 'Marigold and Cable' (of a total of 30) offer a good example of a constant of the poem: that each poem begins by relaunching and repurposing the end of the preceding one:

Lost in weather, in
the phenom's auroral ting,
a sapphire core becomes
a mystic choir and
the blue fat dawn
in morning's scatter,
a musical ground,
speckled glass reflecting

A musical ground,

⁴ Spicer, 164.

the speckled glass
 reflecting the fine-string
 half-tones of ens,
 fabled architectures,
 the cables braiding
 marigolds
 in string light, in
 air and incense⁵

By contrast, ‘The Ship of State’, not least in its appearance on the page as blocks of right-margin justified prose, creates an entirely different sort of lyric time. Here is section 6 in its entirety:

some people survive battle... some their childhood... some survive nothing... some children are forever lost in their body... wave upon wave... voices...sound effects...phantasmagoria... there is no return... only the idea... there is no return only narrative... to survive is to... (*Now*, 94)

We will return to the question of the book’s diverse temporalities. For now, however, let us note that complicating this matter of names and parts still further is the title of the book itself, for *Now It’s Dark* names not only the volume but also two different individual lyrics, which are found separated from each other by three other poems in the ‘Lyric’ section, and which are not distinguished by subtitles or numbers. So which is the poem ‘Now It’s Dark’? Taken together, they seem less like two parts that add up to a whole, and more in line with Robert Smithson’s site/non-site dialectic,⁶ in which each ‘Now It’s Dark’ calls out to another which is not it but without which it is incomplete. Only here, the dialectic is triangulated due to the title of the book as a whole – which of these poems gives its title to the book? Which is the ‘now’ that the title commemorates?

These formal complexities are notable above all for two reasons. First, because if Gizzi’s work calls out for constant close reading, the economies in play here always also render such readings partially inadequate, or frustrated. Second, as we began to see above, this complexity radically troubles the inaugural word of the entire project: ‘now’. ‘Now It’s Dark’ can be read several different ways, and these differences have large implications. Do we hear the title as ‘Once it was light, but now it is dark’ – in other words, the day is drawing to a close and all is coming to an end – or do we hear it as ‘now it’s dark, tomorrow it will be light, and then it will be dark again’; that is to say, that time is cyclical and recursive? Or we could say the book foregrounds this question: what is the relationship of this particular ‘now’, in which I say now, am saying now, singular and unrepeatable, never to come again, to the broader category of the present within which every ‘now’ manifests? The fact that the ‘now’ of the poem ‘Now It’s Dark’ is divided between two poems means that in this book ‘now’ is always ‘now and again’, as it were, and that the singular moment of crisis is nothing other than the always the same moment of all experience. Borges writes: ‘Then I reflected that everything happens to a man precisely, precisely *now*. Centuries of centuries and only in

⁵ Peter Gizzi, *Now It’s Dark* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press), 84-5. Hereafter referred to parenthetically as *Now*, with page numbers in the text.

⁶ The site/non-site dialectic is a central plank of the late work of Robert Smithson. See, for example, ‘Earth’ and ‘Four Conversations Between Dennis Wheeler and Robert Smithson’, in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

the present do things happen.’⁷ Beckett writes, ‘When now?’⁸ And Gizzi, ‘the cold dream / of the past/ braiding / with the now / of blur’ (*Now*, 107-8). Now is the name for when anything happens, and in this book, everything is happening in the dark.

This is because the ‘dark’ of the title is the dark of mourning, one of the book’s major concerns. As soon as the book’s first page we find, ‘as I look at the end / and sing so what’ (*Now*, 3) and ‘Last Poem’ has the lines ‘Thinking of all the people / thinking of people / they won’t see again’ (*Now*, 27), to list just two of many examples. Above all, the book bears the dedication ‘For my brother Tom, *also gone*’ (*Now*, unnumbered page, original italics) and one of the two poems titled ‘Now It’s Dark’ addresses this loss explicitly. ‘Not the easiest day I’m having’ (*Now*, 18), the poem begins, as it makes its way gradually into the painful memory of illness and death:

Being human I know that paper makes my mind.
 Strange pulp reminding me I am far away.
 When my brother could no longer speak
 I said Tommy I got this
 even if I don’t want this, I’ll sing for you.
 When my brother had no voice there was only the couch
 and a wooden floor
 the ceiling and the TV with nothing blaring.
 When my brother lost his voice I lost my childhood
 lost the sun over sand in some place I can’t remember
 in Rhode Island summer.
 So far from myself in a body I can’t remember.
 To no longer remember my body as a child.
 To no longer remember today all that was. (*Now*, 18-19)

I have chosen to cite these particular lines of this meandering poem about mourning, loss and love in order to contextualise Gizzi’s lyricism – a word and concept he is not afraid to stress – in all its complexity. For all that the poem represents the relationship to Tommy in terms of voice and presence, as the poet lends his voice and song to his dying, silent brother, note that this scene itself is surrounded by silence and absence. For example, the mind is made of paper and pulp, not (only) song and singing, and the moment of lyric generosity is bracketed on both sides with a sense not of proximity but of distance: ‘I am far away’ and ‘So far from myself’. As much as the brother is allowed to speak in these lines through the intercession of the poet, the poet loses himself too, through the loss of his brother. As everything fades into memory, memory itself disappears, and this leads us to another major concern of the book: elegy. One of the poems in ‘Lyric’ is titled ‘The Present is Constant Elegy’, for example, but even more, elegy is in fact the explicit concern of the other poem called ‘Now It’s Dark’. ‘Elegy is my tonic’ (*Now*, 31), that poem tells us, and immediately thereafter closes in what seems a familiar elegiac mode:

I recast language in hope
 of recovering the red oak
 my neighbors felled.
 It lived over a hundred years, glowing.
 Now, neither music or rhyme,

⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘The Garden of the Forking Paths’, in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964), 20.

⁸ Beckett, 291.

just night, tin, and sky. (*Now*, 31)

On the surface, these lines clearly affirm a very traditional elegiac position: that what is gone in the world can be recovered in language. Yet should we dig deeper, the redemptive mode becomes less categorical. To start with, the poem's penultimate line brings a ghost to the party: it powerfully echoes pivotal lines from 'Song of Myself', where Walt Whitman invokes an unnamed 'you' – a 'you', as is so often the case in Whitman, at once the reader and someone else entirely – in these terms:

Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat,
Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or
Lecture, not even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice.⁹

'Loose the stop from your throat' – but the other 'Now It's Dark' has told us that that is what its own addressee, Tommy, cannot do. So, if there is 'hope' (and clearly not certainty) of recovering the red oak, it would seem that on the contrary there is no language for the lost *voice* which the poet can only replace, not recreate. Further, in Whitman this moment of 'loafing' on the grass introduces what is arguably the originary transformative moment which underpins all of his poetry: the ecstatic recognition of fellowship with all beings, as well as of the regenerative cycle in which even death feeds life, as life sprouts in the form of grass growing from the bodies decomposing below, becoming 'the beautiful uncut hair of graves'.¹⁰ This is very different from the silence, the mute objects, of the last line of 'Now It's Dark'. But equally important are the poem's first lines: 'No one gave me a greater thing / than their time.' (*Now*, 30) For time is precisely what elegy cannot recover – it can neither sink back into the 'hundred years' in which the red oak lived, or bring those singular years forward into the future again. On the contrary, it can only bring into view a different future than the one that seems implied by the enormity of loss. Like any memorial, the elegy is paradoxically forward-looking. But in this book the elegiac gesture is confronted with what is elsewhere called 'futurelessness'. And it is the way the volume keeps harping on the unstable horizon of the future, both individual and collective, which makes it, paradoxically, a book of our moment. In *Now It's Dark*, the overwhelming richness of the past, of the personal as well as the collective archive, seems to swell and crest at the edge of a precipice, rather than a beach, tumbling into a nowhere and no-time we cannot quite imagine. To put it another way, in *Now It's Dark* we are always already not yet dead.

Or in other words, the insistent pressuring of the moment in Gizzi – the only space in which anything can happen, but seemingly always gone before what happens can arrive – becomes all the more fraught in a book not only about the afterlives of the dead, but about our living as itself a kind of afterlife. 'I live in / goodbye' (*Now*, 48) the poem 'Archival Light' tells us, yet also 'From This End of Sadness' proclaims 'I'm into the way / the technology of an I / is filled with the dead.' (*Now*, 105) Taken together, these lines might imply that the 'I' living in 'goodbye' is itself constituted by the dead it says goodbye to. The term 'technology' is crucial here for understanding the uncanny yet material intimacy in terms of which Gizzi has always imagined the lyric subject. In

⁹ Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 192.

¹⁰ Whitman, 193.

interviews, Gizzi has stressed that 'the sensory data recorded in my poetry is both a fiction of consciousness and the physical reality of my nervous system' (*IW*, 54), which in effect turns the body inside out: nothing is so fictive as sense certainty, yet this fiction is an emanation or allegory of a deeper reality that is not available to the senses without the mediating fiction. What is most physically intimate for Gizzi is also therefore what is most foreign, most unassimilated. In various interviews over the years, Gizzi has described the implications of this for his poetic investigations this way: 'I feel I've become an ethnographer of my own nervous system, that dark chemistry of the body' (*IW*, 54). The use of the term 'ethnographer' rather than, say, organic chemist is witty because it overturns the entire nature/culture opposition, and allows us to see what might otherwise be considered to be the most primal 'nature' as a form of culture. It also opens up another telling analogy Gizzi favours for describing his work as a poet – anthropologist Clifford Geertz's notion of 'thick description', which Gizzi mentions in a recent interview (*IW*, 49) and also in *Now It's Dark*: 'I am an incident trapped in thick description. / Just google it' (*Now*, 22). This is a formulation which posits the 'I' as the object as much as the subject of ethnography.

Beyond this, I would like to suggest that through this rhetoric Gizzi is reanimating in the 21st century what was a foundational complex for early 20th century modernist poetics. In her recent book *Experimental*, Natalia Cecire mobilizes the trope of 'contact' to link the modernist localism of writers like Robert McAlmon and William Carlos Williams and the more or less contemporary rise to dominance of 'fieldwork-oriented' anthropology, as opposed to the 'arm-chair' anthropological comparativism of major 19th century figures, such as Frazer. Cecire takes her cue from the title of Williams's and McAlmon's little magazine (*Contact*), and argues that the trope she names 'contact' links these poetic and scientific projects, 'contact' being what she calls the 'epistemic virtue' 'wherein touching or physical contiguity with the material world guarantees the knowledge status of the language that emerges from that touching.'¹¹ In this way, 'contact' clearly underlies Williams's 'no ideas but in things', to list only a salient and obvious example. Moving forward in history, however, and googling thick description as Gizzi advises, we will discover that Geertz's definition of it might also be seen as a major or even culminating moment in the dynamic Cecire describes. According to Geertz in 1973, in fact, 'thick description' is crucial for warding off the danger that 'cultural analysis [...] will lose touch with the hard surfaces of life'.¹² Rhetorically, there could not be a better example of the kind of 'contact' Cecire investigates. But at the same time, in a passage which Gizzi sometimes discusses with his creative writing students (personal communication from the author), Geertz also defines 'thick description' as a kind of reading as much as a kind of writing: '[...] ethnography is thick description. What the ethnographer is in fact faced with [...] is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into each other, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render [...] Doing ethnography is like trying to read [...] a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherences, suspicious

¹¹ Natalia Cecire, *Experimental: American Literature and the Aesthetics of Knowledge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 161.

¹² Clifford Geertz, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', in *The Interpretations of Culture: Selected Essays* (London: Fontana Press, 1973), 30.

emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour.’¹³

What I would like to propose is that Gizzi’s positing of himself as an auto-ethnographer, but one who takes as object not his own ‘culture’ but his own ‘nervous system’, is a window into how Gizzi rewrites and repurposes the ‘contact’-heavy poetics of Williams but *also* the poetics of Stevens, who looms equally large for Gizzi. I would go even further and suggest that Gizzi’s work is a privileged site for rethinking the complex and counter-intuitive complicity of Williams and Stevens, in which ‘contact’ comes to resemble nothing so much as phenomenological reduction, in a manner that is foundational for American poetry from the 1920s onwards. To put it another way, ‘contact’ for Williams had always as corollary the fundamental alterity of everything there to be touched, and its non-recuperability via writing. This is very clear, for example, in *Spring and All*, where Williams insists that writing is ‘not a conscious recording of the day’s experiences “freshly and with the appearance of reality”,’¹⁴ and that rather, the ‘writer of imagination’ should be ‘released from observing things for the purpose of writing them down later’, as this rejected project would reduce the world to something like a ‘bag of food’ which the writer goes in fear of spilling. Instead, the writer must ‘be there to enjoy, to taste, to engage the free world’, which moreover is ‘a world detached from the necessity of recording it, sufficient to itself, removed from him [the writer] (as it most certainly is) with which he has bitter and delicious relations and from which he is independent. . .’¹⁵ ‘Contact’ is about separation as well as ‘touch’, in this sense; indeed, part of the value of contact for Williams could be said to be the insensibility of what is touched to touch. Cecire stresses this point in a different register, noting that parataxis or concatenation are the main formal analogues of ‘contact’, and that concatenation, by its indifference to logical connection, is a structure which at once ‘is everywhere and intrinsically means nothing’.¹⁶

This seems to be what Stevens picks up on in his famous ‘Nuances on a Theme by Williams’, a poem which fully incorporates Williams’s very short lyric ‘El Hombre’, quoting it in full and stressing its precept even more strongly. ‘Shine alone in the sunrise / toward which you lend no part’ Williams commands his ‘ancient star’, while Stevens goes on to dwell on the star’s ultimate separation from any meaning that can be given to it: ‘Lend no part to any humanity that suffuses / you in its own light. / Be not chimera of morning / Half-man, half star.’¹⁷ Instead, ‘Shine nakedly’ Stevens intones, mobilising one of the key elements of Williams’s ‘contact’ as Cecire elaborates it: the ‘naked’.

Arguably, however, Stevens upends his early paradigm in his late poem ‘Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself’. While this title clearly dialogues with Williams’s famous appeal from *Paterson*, ‘– Say it, no ideas but in things –’,¹⁸ let us remember that an idea *about* a thing is not identical to an idea *in* a thing. But still, if the thing is precedent to the idea, the thing must be located, and this is what Stevens’s poem does in a curious way, because the poem’s starting point is the inability to know

¹³ Geertz, 9-10.

¹⁴ William Carlos Williams, *Collected Poems I: 1909-1939*, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (London: Carcanet, 2000), 207.

¹⁵ Williams, 207.

¹⁶ Cecire, 168.

¹⁷ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 14-15.

¹⁸ William Carlos Williams, *Paterson. Revised Edition*, ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1995), 6.

intuitively whether the 'thing' in question – a 'bird's cry' – is a thing in the mind or a thing in the world. Even more, it is rational deduction, not the direct intuition provided by 'contact', that allows the question to be settled. At the outset of the poem the cry 'seemed like a sound in his mind', but the poem dedicates itself to rejecting this semblance, as if prosecuting an internal argument: 'He knew that he heard it'; 'It would have been outside'; 'It was not from the vast ventriloquism / Of sleep's faded papier-mâché.'¹⁹ Thus the relationship to the cry, even if the latter is ultimately established as a 'thing' and not a mental product, is anything but one of 'contact', just as the 'thing' turns out to be anything but the 'thing itself'. The poem ends with these lines:

That scrawny cry – it was
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,
Still far away. It was like
A new knowledge of reality.²⁰

Far from any resistance to meaning, these lines are outrageous in their blithe assertion of metaphorical equivalences and parallels. Especially pointed here is 'it was part of the colossal sun', which can be read as negating Stevens's invocation of many years before, 'Be not chimera of morning.' The 'ch' of chimera returns here, and on both semantic and graphematic levels the 'cry' is assimilated to the chimeric, as the 'c' of cry morphs into the 'ch' of 'chorister', 'choral wings' and 'choir'. These designations might not qualify as ideas 'about' the thing, but the thing is now a thing of the mind. And the poem's final turn of the screw pivots on the poem's concluding enjambment: 'It was like / A new knowledge of reality.' Let us pause over this final statement: what is not knowledge, but rather 'like' knowledge? How can something that is 'like' knowledge be an object of knowledge? These questions are not idle, but even more important for our purposes is that for the Williams of *Spring and All* 'like' itself was the very word most opposed to contact, and most opposed to the reality with which art is concerned. Speaking of 'crude symbolism' Williams says: 'Such work is empty. [...] It is typified by use of the word "like,"'²¹ and even more pertinently, 'the work of the imagination [is] not "like" anything but transfused with the same forces which transfuse the earth'.²²

One might read Stevens as suggesting that if the work of imagination is not 'like' anything in a crude mimetic sense, nevertheless the 'earth', 'world', or 'real' which it is not like can only appear by way of likeness. 'No ideas but in things' can be taken to mean the thing is also an idea, and an idea a thing, which can be met as such. Might one say contact with the resistance to meaning itself is what allows the thing to circulate in a world of meanings without forcing any of those ideas to be 'about' it?

A unique feature of Gizzi's work is the way he maintains the demotic, local stoniness of Williams's language along with the etherealness of Stevens, in a manner which turns them both inside out. A good example of this is the poem 'That I Saw the Light on Nonotuck Avenue'. The poem consists of a series of 23 dependent clauses, all beginning with 'That'. Paratactic lists of dependent clauses, never or very belatedly

¹⁹ Stevens, 451-2.

²⁰ Stevens, 451-2.

²¹ Williams, *Collected Poems I*, 188.

²² Williams, *Collected Poems I*, 207.

attached to an independent clause which would complete them semantically, has been a signature feature of Gizzi's work throughout this century, and in this respect, 'Nonotuck Avenue' slots into a major vein of his work.²³ In this poem, though, phrases oscillate in a manner which seems to rhyme with the tension in the title, where 'saw the light' seems at once to metaphorically indicate a spiritual or emotional revelation, and to function as the most neutral descriptive phrase. Thus, the poem mixes phrases such as 'That I am hungry', or 'That there are airships overhead', or 'That there are small things in the poem: paper clips, gauze, tater tots, knives', with very different ones such as 'That between bread and ash, there is fire', or 'That I seek knowledge of the ancient sycamore that also lives in the valley where I live', or, in line with Spicer, 'That I found myself born into it with sirens and trucks going by out here in a poem.' Towards the end of the poem, however, we get a very Stevensian bird cry, and an equally Stevensian casual counterfactual:

That I saw the light on Nonotuck Avenue and heard the cry of
a dove recede into a rustle.

That its cry was quiet light falling into a coffin. (*Now*, 10)

In other words, this poem is a place of the banality of tater tots as well as of language that resists the factual (one must ask not only how the aural phenomenon of the 'cry' can become the visual phenomenon of 'light', but also how 'light' can be 'quiet'), a language that is willing to insult and affront the meaningless while also affirming its resistance. The entire poem oscillates in line with the two rhetorical readings of the phrase 'I saw the light', not only thematically (though this is important) but also structurally, in terms of its relation to the construction of meaning. Thinking again of the dialogue between Williams and Stevens, one might suggest that while Williams mostly stresses the demotic American of local contact – the facticity of the speech around him – Stevens works through language as a transcendental structure. To deploy strategically a problematic opposition, we might say Williams tends to be a poet of *parole*, and Stevens of *langue*, for example harping on the system of differences through which 'c' and 'ch' articulate themselves and come to have meaning. This kind of phonemic isolation is something Gizzi has also done throughout his writing, and can be seen in *Now It's Dark* in lines such as 'To be lost in its yesterglow casting shadows upon a silent h. / H for hour and honor, honest and heir, also ghost, ghastly, / ghetto, etc.' (*Now*, 24) To use Gizzi's term, this is language as technology, and if such a concept certainly is not foreign to Williams, who famously referred to a poem as a machine made of words,²⁴ in Williams's fiction (it is a fiction – a poem is not a machine) those parts feel like found things, picked up and assembled. If this is certainly pertinent to Gizzi, at the same time he follows Stevens in asking other questions about

²³ This is often discussed in criticism of his work. For more on dependent clauses, 'if' clauses, and parataxis in his work, see Marjorie Perloff, 'Peter Gizzi's Poetics of Contingency', David Herd, 'The Lyrical Voice as Ethical Medium: Peter Gizzi and the Contemporary Polis', and my 'Peter Gizzi's Emotion Machine', in *In the Air: Essays on the Poetry of Peter Gizzi*, ed. Anthony Calessu (Hanover, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), 44-56, 119-39 and 220-31 respectively.

²⁴ In the introduction to his volume *The Wedge* (1944), Williams writes, 'A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words. When I say there's nothing sentimental about a poem I mean that there can be no part, as in any other machine, that is redundant.' See William Carlos Williams, *Collected Poems II: 1939-1962*. Edited by Christopher MacGowan (London: Carcanet, 2000), 54.

how language could in fact present itself as parts, and what a language of parts implies – the sort of question Stevens asks when he ends ‘The Man on the Dump’ with the two-word sentence fragment, ‘The the’.²⁵ To put it another way, Gizzi shows how much of Stevens’s project can be seen as an investigation of the technology of the ‘I’ which in Williams is the ‘I’ of contact – a thing among things as Olson would have it, but also a built and constructed thing, a thing always in construction too.

Where Gizzi’s interest in this technology veers away from Williams and Stevens, however, is in his insistence that this is a technology specifically of the *dead*, and, to return to Geertz’s analogy, a technology of the letter and the book. Gizzi has said, ‘My nervous system is populated not only by the people in my life, but also the people I’ve read all my life.’ (*IW*, 54) Thus if, as he has also suggested, ‘The beginning of culture is the burial of the dead’, then for Gizzi ‘ethnography’ must start with the mortuary ‘technology’ of the speaking ‘I’, or the lyric voice. The lyric act is always already a kind of burial for Gizzi, an ethereal ‘sky burial’, to quote the title of one of the poems in *Now It's Dark*, as the lyric voice must speak from the community of death: ‘I have always imagined the voice in the poem as being posthumous’ (*IW*, 57), Gizzi puts it in an interview. Throughout his work, Gizzi has worked through these questions of the posthumous voice, of haunting, and of the relationship of the lyric I to its own death and that of others above all by way of Spicer, Dickinson, and Whitman, especially the first two. In *Now It's Dark*, however, Whitman takes pride of place, by virtue of an extraordinary dialogue with his work constituted by the ‘Nocturne’ section of the book, that is, the poem ‘Ship of State’.

The poem begins with the phrase ‘I wandered all night with my corpse’ (a phrase it will repeat verbatim later), which inevitably recalls the first line of Whitman’s ‘The Sleepers’ (‘I wander all night in my vision’),²⁶ and the entire poem consists of phrases separated by three-dot ellipses, in an echo of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. But while ‘The Sleepers’ details the poet’s journey through his dreams and the dreams of others, Gizzi’s work is less about the subjective lability of the mind and the unconscious and more about the brute facticity of corporeality. The Whitmanian tonality and at times vocabulary continues throughout the poem, with scenes of ‘rubble and war debris’ (*Now*, 89), the description of keeping ‘vigil’ (*Now*, 89), or, as the poem puts it, again addressing Whitmanian concerns in a Whitmanian vocabulary: ‘the unstable reanimation of flesh and grass’ (*Now*, 97) as well as the ‘translation’ (*Now*, 97) of the buried body ‘decomposing and flowering’ (*Now*, 95) into the grass that grows from out of graves – also the scene sketched in the pivotal 5th section of *Leaves of Grass*. But in a manner wholly different from Whitman, and more in keeping with the American gothic of Poe, Melville, or Dickinson, there are no companions or comrades on this open road other than the speaker’s living corpse itself, of which he cannot rid himself: ‘it traveled with me...down streets...on walks...in coffee shops...it became indistinguishable from my own form’ (*Now*, 89). It is the corpse that displaces the ‘I’ in every way, in a movement which is also ecstatic in the strict sense: ‘the corpse was joy’ (*Now*, 91), but also, ‘I was here and not here [...] I was now and not now...a something in a world of things’ (*Now*, 91). On the other hand, the corpse also drags the speaker down into an inescapable materiality too: ‘and how does a boy begin to love a corpse...a stinking mass of rotten flesh’ (*Now*, 92). Yet the poem’s last section subtly deviates from the Whitmanian paradigm. ‘consider the brow’ (*Now*, 97), it begins, and goes on to describe

²⁵ Stevens, 186.

²⁶ Whitman, 542.

something at once head and skull. About halfway through the section, however, we find a submerged rhyme and analogy: ‘consider the *pro*w [my emphasis]... its translation...consider the night boat on its way with the soul...’ (*Now*, 97). And here we leave the Whitmanian flowering cemetery for the underworld, in which our nightboat – is it the titular ship of state? – would wend its way across the Acheron. Gizzi ends the section and the poem with characteristic humour but also real pathos:

historically we think it an easy ride in a small bark from shore to shore...but there are many boats and glutted waters...see the yachts and liners...gondolas...and tugs...many vessels tossed in water...skiffs...canoes...trawlers...junks...all of them full...stalled...discontented and decaying...as it is...so then...as here...so there...it figures...the light is filled with dead people...(Now, 97)

‘Ship of State’ leaves the body not decomposing and recomposing towards the future – the gesture which brings ‘Song of Myself’ to a close – but rather stuck in an underworld maritime traffic jam, in a pause and delay which blurs the very border between the living and the dead.

This blur returns in the book’s coda, ‘From This End of Sadness’, which starts like this: ‘A particular blur / attended my mind/from end to end. // These feelings / of futurelessness.’ (*Now*, 101) And like Whitman at the end of ‘Song of Myself’, the poem will also address a readerly you when it closes. After the earlier mention of ‘neither music or rhyme’ (*Now*, 31), which cites section 5 of ‘Song of Myself’, it’s hard not to hear ‘song’ in a Whitmanian vein as the poem comes to an end:

I see you turning
and bending there
in the cold dream
of the past
braiding
with the now
of blur.

Blur with me
when I am sick
of dying,
fearful of failing
the song I love.

Be with me
whenever I sit
wasting days.

Comfort the hours. (*Now*, 107-8)

‘Wasting days’ might hark back to Whitman’s famous ‘loafing’ – his much-discussed refusal of the capitalist productive temporality in which every moment is a potential unit of profit. If we might contrast this latter mode to the gift of time Gizzi mentions in ‘Now it’s Dark’, however, let us remember that this gift is double when the future recedes not on the horizon, but *as* a horizon. The end of the future as horizon leads less to a *carpe diem*, it turns out, than to the vitiating of every ‘now’, as they fall out of history. From this optic, time emerges less as a resource to be wasted than as, simply, waste. In a remarkable discussion of Emily Dickinson’s line, “‘Nothing” is the force

that renovates the world', Gizzi has said 'One of the ways to think about that nothing is the engagement with the invisible world, the understanding of one's periodicity that we're not going to be here forever, that we're going to be gone a lot longer than we are here. That's a kind of nothing. And that reality is to understand that in a way, we're part of nothing.' (*IW*, 166-67) Over the last decade, many writers and intellectuals have been increasingly marking in different ways that what Gizzi says here about the individual also holds for humanity as a whole. Not just in terms of the individual but also collectively, in terms of the species, it is now possible to see the nothingness to which we are moving, and Gizzi's poetry opens the deep time not only of the past, I would argue, but of the future. *Now It's Dark* is full of the 'homely gifts and hindered words' that Dickinson writes of, as well as the 'nothing' that anchors so much of her thought.²⁷ For Gizzi, this dominating nothing can also be thought of as the 'invisible world' to which poetry is attuned: 'The invisible world can be a few things like the dead we carry inside us, that living underworld in all of us, and it can also be the world that is always surrounding us and otherwise goes on [un]recognized, unsung' (*IW*, 167). With an allusion to Williams's 'To Elsie', Gizzi suggests 'We witness and adjust these things into an act of poesis. That's the nothing that poems make happen because we begin to be given a relief and a shape and a sound and a dimension. And that way, nothing becomes everything.' (*IW*, 167).

The danger in such a position, of course, is that by its very power it causes 'nothing', now everything, to be annulled as such. But it is also possible to posit that Gizzi's poetry records another measure, in which there is no more 'nothing' than there is 'everything', and that is something different. As we have seen, in *Now It's Dark* it is the overflow of time into the moment, whatever that is, as much as the moment's fugitivity that is at stake. One of the forms that overflow takes is the poems' ability to engage in the kind of dialogic exchange with poets like Williams, Stevens, Whitman and Dickinson that we have examined above. This form of 'technology', to use Gizzi's own term, constitutes a kind of counterflow to the assault of what Franco Berardi calls 'semicapital' in *After the Future*. There he writes that 'cyberspace overloads cybertime', leaving 'flesh, body, desire in permanent electrostimulation'.²⁸ Gizzi's poetry, so often stressing the ambient whir, buzz and blur both within the mind and as mediated through the senses, is both of this time, the long now of the 21st century, and pushing back against it, as his writing is composed so powerfully of the afterlives of modernist and proto-modernist versions of futurity (though Dickinson and Spicer, who see futurity only as haunting, intervene crucially here). Gizzi's 'feelings of futurelessness' are in many respects the poetry of Berardi's sense that the 'future' is an idea of the past – the foundational idea of the century we have now fully left behind. But no one more than Gizzi is poet of the new now.

²⁷ Dickinson's short poem reads in full: 'By homely gifts and hindered words / The human heart is told / Of nothing - / "Nothing" is the force / That renovates the World-' *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Ralph W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999): 589-90.

²⁸ Franco Berardi, *After the Future*, ed. Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011), 55.

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Aceste sentimente de lipsă de viitor. Volumul lui Peter Gizzi *Now It's Dark*

Acest eseu examinează volumul lui Peter Gizzi's *Now It's Dark* din multiple perspective. În primul rând, se concentrează pe construcția complicată a volumului, considerându-l mai degrabă o lucrare extinsă sub forma unui dialog decât o simplă colecție de poeme. Atenție se acordă legăturilor structurale complexe și divergențelor dintre diversele secțiuni ale volumului, și modului în care Gizzi le folosește pentru a disloca și a complica elementele tradiționale ale liricii, nu doar pe cele ale liricii temporale. Analiza temporalității care reprezintă a doua parte a analizei ne permite încadrarea operei lui Gizzi într-un context al unor interlocutori importanți din modernism și protomodernism, ca de exemplu Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams și Wallace Stevens. Eseul acordă o atenție specială modului în care opera lui Gizzi poate fi privită ca intervenind în și adâncind dialogul improbabil dintre ultimii doi, prin investigarea conceptului de „contact” al Nataliei Cecire și al tropului autoetnografiei la Gizzi. În concluzii, eseu examinează cum opera poetică a lui Gizzi, prin doliu, elegie și problema trecutului, se leagă de momentul prezentului istoric la modul general.

