


THE CATHOLIC WORLD REPORT

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A Poet Reflects on Our Times

Dana Gioia's new collection of poetry is a finely crafted consideration of the true and the beautiful.

By Ann Applegarth

Wednesday, June 20, 2012



When Dana Gioia (pronounced JOY-uh) was appointed Judge Widney Professor of Poetry and Public Culture at the University of Southern California, the position he now holds, David St. John of USC described his new colleague as “partly an old-fashioned storyteller and partly a metaphysical poet of reflection and devotion.”

In *Pity the Beautiful*, Gioia's long-awaited fourth volume of poems, the poet wears both hats with grace. The 32 poems manage to soar toward the tip of heaven while remaining firmly grounded in the daily lives and loves of real and imaginary people who populate his poetic earth.

During the years in which he became a widely published poet, essayist, translator, critic, and editor, Gioia

also achieved success as a businessman. After earning BA and MBA degrees from Stanford University and an additional MA in comparative literature from Harvard University, he worked for General Foods, becoming vice-president in charge of marketing for the Jell-O and Kool-Aid accounts. He resigned his corporate position in 1992 to write full-time.

In 1991, Gioia gained international prominence with publication in the *Atlantic* of his seminal essay "Can Poetry Matter?", a persuasive argument that poetry is essential to an educated society. A year later, his book by the same title continued to fuel a return to poetry as the property of all the people and not exclusively that of academic specialists.

Appointed chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts in 2003—and twice unanimously confirmed in that appointment by the US Senate—Gioia's two three-year terms in Washington, DC are legendary for turning a moribund federal agency into a vital source of funding for arts programs throughout the United States. His genius in securing both public and government support and funding for the arts enabled him to award direct grants to underserved communities and to create a series of NEA National Initiatives that still thrive:

Shakespeare in American Communities has exposed thousands of children and adults to the Bard's immortal works. Professional theater companies from 35 states have toured more than 2,000 communities in all 50 states to perform for nearly one million students, many of whom had never seen live theater.

Poetry Out Loud: National Recitation Contest, in which high school students in every state compete by studying, memorizing, and reciting great poems, now involves nearly half a million students. Each year the contest awards \$50,000 in scholarships.

The Big Read, in which entire communities read and discuss the same book, has reached cities and towns in all 50 states and even been used in international cultural exchanges.

Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience brought American authors to conduct workshops among troops returning from the Middle East (and their wives) to write about their wartime experiences. The resulting anthology was named by the *Washington Post* as one of the top 10 non-fiction books of 2006, and the documentary film *Operation Homecoming* was nominated for an Academy Award.

Other initiatives include *American Masterpieces: Three Centuries of Artistic Genius*, a series of documentaries, and NEA Jazz Masters, a fellowship program for the promotion of jazz, which Gioia calls the only uniquely American art form and the country's most treasured and influential export.

Gioia is one of the leading poets of the New Formalist movement, which championed the return to traditional poetic techniques such as rhyme, meter, and established forms, as well as to the importance of narrative poetry with less "autobiographical" emphasis. He writes, "As long as there have been poets, those poets told stories. Those stories were rarely about their own lives but about imagined lives—drawn from myth, legend, history, or current events."

Practicing what he preaches, Gioia has achieved impressive success. His 1991 collection of poems, *The Gods of Winter*, won the Poets' Prize. In 2001, his collection of poems, *Interrogations at Noon*, was awarded the American Book Award. His poetry has been anthologized in the *Norton Anthology of Poetry* and *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*. It has been set to music, as well as translated into French, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Chinese, and Arabic. In 2005, he received the John Ciardi Award for Lifetime Achievement in Poetry.

Dana Gioia's accomplishments have received Catholic, as well as literary, recognition. In 2010, the University of Notre Dame awarded him its Laetare Medal, an honor traditionally given to an American Roman Catholic in recognition of outstanding service to the Church and to society.

In 2008, the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology in Berkeley, California, bestowed upon Gioia the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters, one of 10 honorary degrees he holds. In the citation for the poet's induction into the school's College of Fellows, Father Michael Sweeney, OP described the new fellow perfectly: "Dana Gioia, husband and father, acknowledged poet and reader of our times, literary and cultural

critic, promoter of poetic and critical discourse; teacher and educator of teachers, business executive and government leader, musician and patron of music from opera to jazz; son of immigrants; Angelino and voice of the Sonoma landscape, bilingual in Californian and Washingtonian dialects; anthologist in the service of imagination and memory, translator of works ancient and contemporary, of poetry, drama, and prose fiction from Latin, Italian, German, and Romanian sources; patron of composition and its performance in the classroom, theater, and band.”

That extraordinarily full life translates into Gioia’s writing. In *Pity the Beautiful*, the depth and variety of the poems makes rich fare. His own finely crafted works—musical to the ear, pleasing to the eye, and written in several interesting voices—include tales of married love, of what seemed to be love but wasn’t, of love lost or remembered; a long ghost tale told by a monk; satirical jabs at soulless modernity; songs from his libretto for the opera *Tony Caruso’s Final Broadcast*; a profound parody of the Beatitudes; and tender personal poems remembering his father and his son. An additional delight is the inclusion of several of Gioia’s masterful translations from Italian poets Mario Luzi and Bartolo Cattafi.

Do read the title poem first. Since Gioia is Catholic, his book’s title was puzzling—surely he, like Dostoevsky, believes that “beauty will save the world.” How could this master spinner of exquisite lines who as chairman of the NEA spread beauty throughout our land find “the beautiful” pitiable? But the poem clarifies the quandary; it speaks of beauty divorced from truth and goodness. As it brilliantly exposes our culture’s worship of youth, celebrity, glitz, and glamour—and even rouses chuckles of superior glee—the poem achieves the poet’s goal at its end by stirring the reader’s pity, deep compassion, and sadness.

Another poem that prompts hilarity even as it quietly convicts is “The Seven Deadly Sins,” which cautions the reader to:

Notice how Avarice
keeps refilling his glass
whenever he thinks we are not looking,
while Envy eyes your plate.

And Gioia further skewers today’s USA with “Shopping,” which begins:

I enter the temple of my people but do not pray.
I pass the altars of the gods but do not kneel
Or offer sacrifices proper to the season.

Strolling the hushed aisles of the department store,
I see visions shining under glass,
Divinities of leather, gold, and porcelain,
Shrines of cut crystal, stainless steel, and silicon.

and the satirical “The Freeways Considered as Earth Gods,” which includes these lines:

We do not fail to worship them. Each morning
Millions creep in slow procession on our pilgrimages.
We crave the dangerous power of their presence.
And they demand blood sacrifice, so we mount
Our daily holocaust on the blackened ground.

For sheer splendor of language, consider this stanza from "Prophecy":

Underneath the murmur of the wasp
we hear the dry grass bending in the wind
and the spider's silken whisper from its web.

or the lovely, nuanced poem that inspired the book's cover photograph, "The Angel with the Broken Wing," spoken by a carved wooden Mexican *santo*:

I am the Angel with the Broken Wing,
The one large statue in this quiet room.
The staff finds me too fierce, and so they shut
Faith's ardor in this air-conditioned tomb.

The docents praise my elegant design
Above the chatter of the gallery.
Perhaps I am a masterpiece of sorts —
The perfect emblem of futility.

Mendoza carved me for a country church.
(His name's forgotten now except by me.)
I stood beside a gilded altar where
The Hopeless offered God their misery.

I heard their women whispering at my feet —
Prayers for the lost, the dying, and the dead.
Their candles stretched my shadow up the wall,
And I became the hunger that they fed.

I broke my left wing in the Revolution
(Even a saint can savor irony)
When troops were sent to vandalize the chapel.
They hit me once — almost apologetically.

For even the godless feel something in a church,
A twinge of hope, fear? Who knows what it is?
A trembling unaccounted by their laws,
An ancient memory they can't dismiss.

There are so many things I must tell God!
The howling of the damned can't reach so high.
But I stand like a dead thing nailed to a perch,
A crippled saint against a painted sky.

And so Dana Gioia's poignant poems go. Poems that remember the past, stare courageously into the face of the present, and look toward the future with faith and hope. Poems that make us think. Make us ponder. Make us question (eight of the poems end with a question mark). Make us laugh—and cry. Make us understand. Make us humbler and kinder in our judgments. Make us grateful for this particular collection of poems and for this particular poet at this particular time.

Pity the Beautiful: Poems

By Dana Gioia

Paperback, Graywolf Press, 80 pp., \$15.00

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