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REVIEW - Poetry - "Pity the Beautiful" - Dana Gioia: An Acknowledged Legislator of the Word

by Susan Balée

"More light!"

Yes, Dana informed me, those were indeed the last words Goethe spoke before dying in his chair in Weimar. "Of course," he added, a sly twinkle in his green eyes, "in his German dialect he might simply have been saying, 'It hurts!'"



Oh, that's Dana Gioia for you, as playful as he is serious, as practical as he is erudite. He knows poets don't rule the world anymore – far from being the unacknowledged legislators of it, as Percy Bysshe Shelley put it back when Shelley hung out with that gang known as the British Romantics. Those pouty-lipped word boys stood sublimely on their cultural mountaintop, gazing down upon the literate (or maybe just anyone with ears) and those folks gazed back worshipfully. For those who love language at its most artful, it's kind of sad to remember those long ago days when words ruled and literature really mattered to loads of people.

You know, those days before the novel shoved the poem to the margins of literary culture, and then so many other types of media nearly kicked it off the page altogether. Poets nowadays in America live on the margins of word culture. Well, unless you count rappers, as Dana does, and lucky audiences have had the chance to hear him riff brilliantly on the way their rhymes and lines, measure for measure, match up (or don't) to Shakespeare's iambic pentameters. Dana Gioia's years as the Mad Man of General Foods have served him well as the Can-Do Man of American literary culture. The author of *Can Poetry Matter?* has done more to make it matter than anyone else in this country lo these last twenty years.

Twenty years being exactly how long ago I met Dana Gioia, at the Wesleyan Writers' Conference, where I was a student of fiction and he was a teacher of poetry, but an emcee of much else. Anyone could introduce herself to this impresario, because Dana Gioia is the opposite of a snob. He could not care less about elite circles, preferring instead democratic gatherings where all are welcome. Anyone who knows him can attest to his open, friendly demeanor, just as we can all attest to his power to make things happen in literary ways. He brings like minds together; he encourages writers to write, to translate the obscure Albanian short story, research the biography of a wandering fugitive poet, pen a novella, establish a poetry conference, or contribute a section to one of his textbooks. The same conference where I met Dana, I also met another wonderful American poet, Ted Kooser, who later became a Poet Laureate of the U.S. At one of

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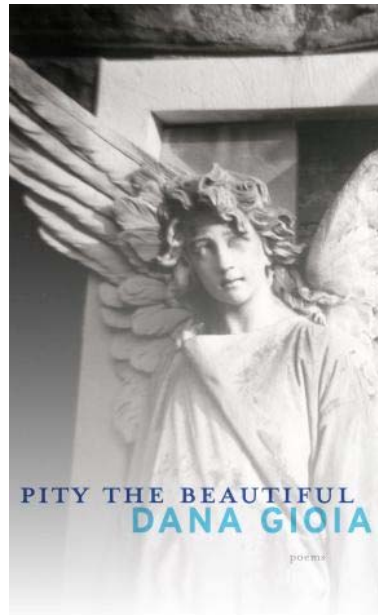
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the post-reading events, where Dana glowed like the Roman candle he is and almost every moth in the room fluttered over to his flame, Ted confided in me, "Dana is a kingmaker. He's persuasive, and if he likes someone's work, he will get them noticed." Even then, the man whose last name means "joy" struck me as energizing and indefatigable, and nothing has happened in two decades to change my opinion.

Who was this guy? Over the course of years of running into him at writers' conferences, or events for *The Hudson Review*, where we are both regular contributors, I've gotten to know quite a bit about the Indefatigable Kingmaker to Whom Poetry Matters. Early in a remarkable career, he became a vice president at General Foods (he got jiggy with jello, very profitably for his company) who wrought verses so fine you could find them in *The New Yorker* and *The Hudson Review* and who, also, occasionally taught workshops at universities. After a few years of juggling the demands of a successful business career with those of a poet coming into his prime (though no doubt he'd brought a much-needed artistry to capitalism as he practiced it), he left the business world to write full-time; but he also continued to teach a few classes and to edit some incredible literature textbooks. He wrote a libretto for an exceptional opera (*Nosferatu*) and founded a hands-on annual poetry conference (on June 6-9 it convenes for its 18th year at West Chester University in Pennsylvania). Ultimately, his energy as a speaker and writer, combined with his convictions as a Catholic and a fiscally conservative moderate, brought him to the attention of Capitol Hill during the reign of George W. Bush. In 2003, he ascended to the realm of real-world legislators as head of the National Endowment of the Arts, an organization he energized with programs to get people reading, talking about books, attending operas and lyric-infused musical events, and seeing word culture in all kinds of innovative ways.

Now he's a professor at U.S.C. and no doubt scaring all the chickens in the henhouse of academe. For chicken is something Dana Gioia will never be, not in life or in art, and that makes him a formidable thinker, teacher, speaker. But can he write poetry? Oh, yes.



The themes of *Pity the Beautiful* are elemental and divine. Ghosts flit through these poems, and a sense of mystery elevates the mundane. Humans crave the supernatural (consider the popularity of vampires, werewolves, and zombies in our culture), and though Gioia believes in *holy* ghosts, he is not wed to any doctrinal sense of his faith. He is catholic in his interests, and often satiric in his take on the foibles of humanity...including his own.

The second poem in the collection, and one of its best, "The Angel with the Broken Wing," is narrated by a wooden statue, a *santo* carved by a Mexican folk artist, who's borne mute witness to history, watching as war and faith decline into secular futility. He tells us how far he's fallen, even as an icon, in the first stanza:

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.

Of course the angel remembers more exciting, even tumultuous days when desperate supplicants worshipped him as the symbol of and the conduit to the higher being they craved:

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.

What would it be like to reflect all day on this ultimate fallen world, its tourists passing through, unknowing or caring about their final destination? The angel's final lines pierced my ears the first time I heard them read by the author, and they leap just as achingly off the page at my eyes:

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.

The angel summons to mind another theme common to Gioia's poems: prophecy and regret. In the poem titled "Prophecy," the speaker understands the human need to predict the future, "For what is prophecy but the first inkling / of what we ourselves must call into being?" The sentiment is echoed in a later poem, "Autumn Inaugural," where people praise innocence but "dream of a future so fitting and so just / That our desire will bring it into being."

If anyone could bring a better future for literature into being, it would be Dana Gioia. He has served as the angel to many a bookish venture, despite having his own wings clipped – or at least a few feathers plucked from them – during the culture wars. He devoted six years of his life to Capitol Hill, trying to make literature a regular part of every American's life. During the years that he was a smiling public man, his own poetry remained unwritten. Who could write, discovering, as he did, the painful facts, rendered statistically, of our eroding culture? If poetry was moribund, no surprise: Reading itself was in danger of becoming a lost skill.

His own book, *Disappearing Ink*, suggested what was happening to print culture, but recognized the possibility that something unexpected might yet occur to renew interest in texts. After all, when the chain bookstores made cozy places to read while drinking caffeinated beverages and snacking on sugar-laced carbs, Americans flocked to them, draping their large bottoms on plush cushions while holding books and turning pages. Unexpected variables give the lie to prophesying, and no doubt explain why the stock market tanked despite the best predictions of analysts. There's always some unexpected event that won't follow the rules, and in its most dire guise it's one that involves death – burning, broken towers -- and in its lesser form, popped bubbles and pipe dreams gone up in smoke.

We never do pay enough attention to the cycles of nature. Biologists know the seeds of our demise reside in everything mortal, so "Prophecy" ends with what every other species exists to show us could we just pay attention – the final resting place where all prophecies go to be fulfilled:

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

Gioia, in his working life, moves and shakes the people and institutions he encounters. Thus it's odd how often his poems are about people who have not done what they intended, about fires not started or promises unrealized. A recurring theme in his poetry is the flip side of prophecy: regret. Sounding a note from Henry James's great short story, "The Beast in the Jungle," Gioia's poem "The Road" opens, "He sometimes felt that he had missed his life / By being far too busy looking for it." The image of walking, singly and in throngs, leads to this

sonnet's fine closing couplet:

The road ahead seemed hazy in the gloom.

Where was it he had meant to go, and with whom?

Where *do* we go when we return to the past? Like Gioia, I've now reached the age where events to commemorate one's younger self pop up in my e-mail on a regular basis. I've managed to avoid attending any reunions, though in the last couple of years I've seen some good high school friends for the first time in 30 years and I can imagine what they're like. Indeed, I don't need to line up alongside my cohort, for I have Gioia's "Reunion" to capture for me the bemusement attendant upon such gatherings.

This is my past where no one knows me.

These are my friends whom I can't name—

Here in a field where no one chose me,

The faces older, the voices the same.

It's hard not to pair this poem with the title poem of the collection, for we all know what happens to those who achieve their greatest successes in high school.

Pity the pretty boys,

the hunks, and Apollos,

the golden lads whom

success always follows.

Why pity them? Because success may accompany them for a brief while, but rarely does it stay.

Pity the faded,

the bloated, the blowsy,

the paunchy Adonis

whose luck's gone lousy.

And then, because this is a poem by Dana Gioia, we realize Whom we really must pity:

Pity the gods,

no longer divine.

Pity the night

the stars lose their shine.

As it happens, "Pity the Beautiful" links well with another fine poem in the collection that meditates on our American consumer culture. "Shopping" recognizes the mall for what it is in modern culture. Not just the Main Street of social life, but the "temple of [our] people" with its "arcades of abundance." It's easy to consider our material goods and make an inventory of them that reads like a litany for the faithful. However, the anaphoric sequence that begins recognizably religious soon shifts to the language of seduction: "Redeem me," "Beguile me," "Show me," "Sing me" – and then a king's ransom of objects follows, all delicate and scented, or silky and shining. So much *stuff*:

Heaped like cumuli in the morning sky,

As if all caravans and argosies ended in this parking lot

To fill these stockrooms and loading docks.

But of course, no tangible object can fill the lacuna, the hole at the heart of the shopper, "Because I would buy happiness if I could find it/ Spend all that I possessed or could borrow." The shopper wonders where "shall I discover the one true thing?"

At that moment the poem begins to shift, as the shopper's longing for the one true thing becomes personified: "I look for you among the pressing crowds/ But they know nothing of you, turning away/....There is no angel among the vending stalls and signage." The person sought becomes ever more colloquial – "Where are you,

my fugitive?..... Where are you, my errant soul and innermost companion?" So colloquial that the speaker wonders, "Are you outside amid the potted palm trees / Bumming a cigarette or joking with the guards"?

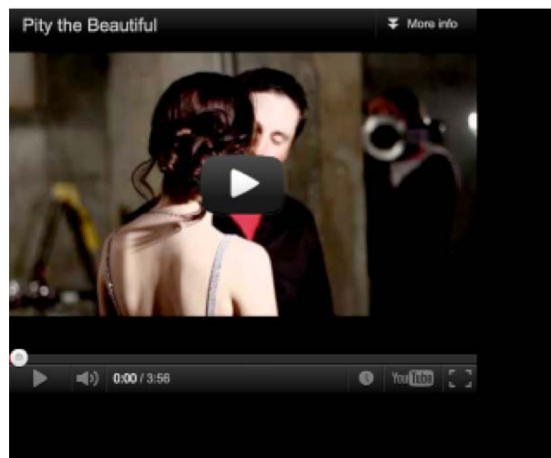
Joan Osborne fans, of whom I am one, are going to recognize the poet's conceit, though I do not know if Gioia has any idea how the Muzak of the mall may have infiltrated his poem. Consider the lyrics of Osborne's most famous song, well-known to any of us listening to top-40 radio in 2007: "What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us; just a stranger on the bus trying to make his way home? Back up to heaven all alone....." Now look at Gioia's final stanza and see if you can make the chime disappear:

...Is it you I catch a sudden glimpse of
Smiling behind the greasy window of the bus
As it disappears into the evening rush?

The echo, far from undermining the poem, only makes it more accessible to contemporary readers.

Those readers are likely to love the long narrative poem in here, "Haunted," and it's unlikely that they'll recognize the American roots of the poem in Longfellow's "Evangeline" and "Hiawatha." This poem is a ghost story, told both suspensefully and satirically. I will leave it unanalyzed, a treasure for readers to discover and unwrap for themselves.

Fire is Gioia's consuming element and as flames run through the volume "like a bright thread through the spreading ashes / fire in flakes from the trellised vines and branches" ("Las Animas"), my wish for him is readers who will catch these sparks and carry them to their own hearths.



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Susan Balée regularly contributes essays on literature and culture to *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The Hudson Review*. Her work has also appeared in many other journals including *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Women's Review of Books*, *The Weekly Standard*, and *Wild River Review* ("Memoir of a Ghost"). Years ago she edited a literary magazine, *Northeast Corridor*, where parts of Dana Gioia's libretto for *Nosferatu* originally appeared. Currently, Balée is a full-time faculty member in the Intellectual Heritage Program at Temple University.

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