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April 29, 2012

The Businessman, the Statesman, and the Poet

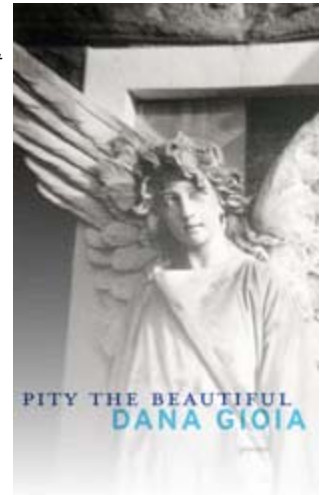
Ed note: On Thursday, April 26, 2012, at The Corner Bookstore in Manhattan (93rd Street and Madison Avenue), Dana Gioia read from Pity the Beautiful, his most recent volume of poetry. Here is the text of David Lehman's introduction. (sdh):

Most poets lead lives of quiet desperation or perhaps subdued contentment. The example of Dylan Thomas to the contrary notwithstanding, the life of a modern poet is not supposed to be dramatic, exciting, full of unexpected detours and flamboyant adventures. Take a look at the contributors' notes of a poetry anthology and you'll see the typical profile: the poet has an MFA degree, teaches writing workshops at a university or college, has several publications, has gained some recognition, and lives with spouse plus a pet with a cute name in Tuscaloosa or Kalamazoo, or maybe Iowa City or Ann Arbor.

How different from this paradigm is the life and career of Dana Gioia.

After college at Stanford, Dana studied comparative literature at Harvard, picking up a master's degree but deciding that the academic life was not for him. In 1975, he returned to Stanford to study business. With his MBA in hand he began working for General Foods in Rye Brook, NY, becoming a vice president of marketing, with responsibilities for such accounts as Jell-O and Kool-Aid. Still later he specialized in mergers-and-acquisitions. This is demanding work, but Dana, whose unflagging energy and stringent work ethic remain an inspiration to his friends, did not put his literary life on hold.

Mindful of the great American poets who toiled not in ivory towers but in insurance companies, medical practices, libraries, journalism, as well as commerce, Gioia was a businessman by day but managed to publish poems and ambitious essays in prestigious magazines such as The Hudson Review and elsewhere. He became a leader of the New Formalism, a movement determined to restore to poetry the importance formerly placed on rhyme and meter. He also translated Montale, wrote touching personal memoirs about Elizabeth Bishop (whom he had come to know while at Harvard) and John Cheever, and in 1991 penned an influential and much-quoted essay for *The Atlantic* that won him many ardent admirers and a fair share of enemies: "Can Poetry Matter?" Nearly twenty years later, the poetry website called *Scarriet* posted its "hot 100" list, and there in second place, between Billy Collins ("a poet of wit and popularity") and David Lehman ("BAP takes the pulse better than prizes/contests do")



you will find Dana Gioia, whose "famous essay still resonates."

After leaving the business world, Dana gave more time to the literary life – writing poems and essays and opera libretti, editing textbooks, translating Seneca, collaborating with all sorts of folks on all sorts of worthy projects. But he had another surprise in store for us. He became, in 2003, the chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, in which capacity he served for six years, piloting ambitious programs and managing to sell the arts to congressmen not necessarily disposed to be supportive. It is safe to say that not since Archibald MacLeish headed the Library of Congress has a poet worked so hard, and accomplished so much of value, in so prominent a position in the federal government.

On a purely personal note, I like to remember the day in 2003 when Dana came to New York and we had coffee at the Cornelia Street Café. Dana told me about the National Book Festival he was organizing for the fall and he asked me to help him make a presentation of American poetry. There would be a brunch at the White House that my wife, Stacey, and I could attend. I said: My mother – It would mean a lot to her, a holocaust refugee, then 88, to come. Dana took the cell phone out of his pocket and made a call and five minutes later my mother was on the guest list. The day we visited the White House was one of the happiest days in her life, and for that I will always have Dana to thank.

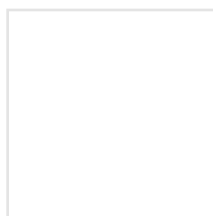
Now Dana is publishing his fourth book of poems, *Pity the Beautiful*. It is his first collection in more than a decade, and I have no hesitation in declaring it to be his finest to date – and surely – in such poems as "Special Treatments Ward" and "Majority" and "Being Happy" and "The Road" -- his most poignant. There's a poem that appeared in the *Hudson Review* that's out of this world: "The Lunatic, the Lover, and the Poet." These are poems in which sentiment is refined by technical prowess, and simple words combine to make music and meaning merge marvelously and memorably.

It's a privilege to present to you this man of letters and of action, the author of *Pity the Beautiful*, my friend, the poet Dana Gioia.

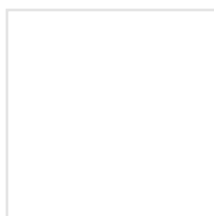
-- David Lehman

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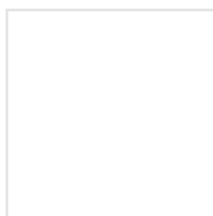
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1

Marissa Despain said...

This is a wonderful reminder of a terrific evening. I'm just sorry I had to run out without having a chance to get Mr. Gioia to sign my book. Thanks.

[Reply April 29, 2012 at 05:36 PM](#)

2

Earle Hitchner said...

Dana Gioia is the subject of my doctoral dissertation. As a previous BAP guest blogger, I immediately recognized in his poetry what I admire so much in others': sly wit, deft rhyme, ensorceling rhythm, capacious knowledge, irrepressible curiosity, and an unbudgeable commitment to the right word in the right place at the right time. Bravo, David, for distilling Dana's verse skills and myriad achievements so effectively.

[Reply April 30, 2012 at 12:35 PM](#)

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