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The Flâneur, the Chemist, and the Chairman

THE POEMS IN W. S. DI PIERO'S *NITRO NIGHTS* variously mine family memories, draw on Joseph Cornell's diary, take us into a sixteenth-century artist's workshop; a handful of them, under the general title "St. Agnes Hospital Archive," are monologues in a range of voices, including a veteran's moving account of his wartime experience ("the camps, our first look inside, / made me a Jew all over again"). But the poems that dominate this, Di Piero's tenth collection, are rather like verse versions of *film noir*, with the poet himself—or a speaker we're plainly expected to identify with him—as the protagonist.[1]

Who is this figure? He's a solitary walker in the city, a *flâneur*—a modern urban type that a not inconsiderable writer once described as follows:

> The crowd is his element . . . His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world . . .[2]

Then again, Di Piero's streets—usually in San Francisco, where he lives—seem more often empty than crowded; as the book's title suggests, the night (as with Sky Masterson in *Guys and Dolls*) is his time of day. In various poems—their language rich, rhythmic, and intense, but consistently natural seeming and never overly dense or pretentious —Di Piero captures a few moments of a Fourth of July evening on Market Street, an episode in a hotel hallway in Chicago, a nocturnal interlude at a bus stop at Haight and Fillmore. The poems are slices of life—always sharply observed, often affecting—and frequently have a stream-of-consciousness feel about them. In a way, they represent the very best of a certain kind of contemporary poetry; at the same time,

[1] NITRO NIGHTS, by *W. S. Di Piero*. Copper Canyon Press. $15.00p.

[2] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, trans. by Jonathan Mayne (New York, 1964). Originally published in *Le Figaro* in 1863.

however, they also draw attention to what some of us might consider a common failing of contemporary poetry—namely, a disinclination to proceed from sensation to thought, a conviction that the kind of general statement in which, say, Alexander Pope specialized no longer has any place in serious verse.

On the other hand, the very randomness of the accumulated details in these poems, the reluctance to force these constellations of impressions to add up to anything in particular is, frankly, a big part of Di Piero's point here. Reading this book, one is reminded more than once of Frank O'Hara's classic anthology poem "The Day Lady Died," in which, during a busy day of wandering the Manhattan streets, he espies a *New York Post* headline about Billie Holiday's death; as it turns out, Di Piero has included here a tribute to another famous jazz singer, Susannah McCorkle, who in 2001, at age fifty-five, committed suicide by leaping from the window of her Manhattan apartment. In that poem, as it happens, Di Piero succinctly defends his images' insistent resistance to any artist-imposed order: "Life's got no shapeliness, / it crowds and pours from windows / like broken hourglass sand."

There should be more poetry books like Carl Djerassi's perfectly titled *A Diary of Pique 1983–1984*.[3] Among other things, it would make poetry a great deal more attractive to a great many people who may not think they're poetry readers but who respond to a good story, a playful use of language, and a dose of spice—not to mention intelligence that isn't out to advertise itself and feeling that's utterly stripped of sentimentality.

Why, come to think of it, *aren't* there more poetry books like this? Haven't all of us gone through something not unlike the *annus horribilis* Djerassi endured all those years ago, when the love of his life ripped his heart out by deserting him (temporarily, as it turned out) for some jerk, thereby prompting an avalanche of verses, by turns passionate, despairing, vindictive, wise, self-pitying, and oozing with (to borrow his own term) "narcissistic wrath"? Djerassi is, in case you didn't know, the "Father of the Pill"—the famous chemist whose invention of reliable birth control turned human civilization upside down. But as this book reminds us, even a scientific genius who has transformed the world is capable of having his own personal life turned topsy-turvy by the most banal, the most clichéd, the most ordinary of plot turns.

And yet what a book he got out of it! Djerassi, who since exiting the lab has written several novels and plays, is that most obnoxious of things, a man gifted in both science and art; and the book he has given us here is, for all the pain that went into it, a delightful concoction, a *pièce de revanche* (as he himself puts it) crammed with wit and self-irony and generously equipped with an engaging prose preamble that spells

[3] EIN TAGEBUCH DES GROLLS/A DIARY OF PIQUE 1983–1984, by *Carl Djerassi*. Haymon Verlag/University of Wisconsin Press. $19.95. In English with facing German translations by *Sabine Hübner*.

out the circumstances under which the poems were written—and that recounts the happy aftermath, in which he and his errant lover were reunited, married, and enjoyed years of wedded bliss until her untimely passing in 2007.

The love of Djerassi's life, as it happens, was Diane Middlebrook, a professor of English at Stanford University and a leading member of the feminist academic establishment. Djerassi vividly depicts the differences between their backgrounds: she, the thoroughgoing American, born in 1939 in Pocatello, Idaho; he, Vienna-born and sixteen years her senior, a Central European sophisticate from Central Casting—worldly, highly cultured, matter-of-factly multilingual, and an unabashed ladies' man of the old school. Middlebrook, best known for her bestselling 1991 biography of Anne Sexton, also wrote a 2003 study of the marriage between Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, and there is something charmingly apropos about the fact that *A Diary of Pique*, on the one hand, feels very much like the product of a European mind steeped in Goethe and Heine and, on the other, brings to mind the emphatically American confessional verse of Plath and Sexton.

Another distinction Djerassi explores to witty effect is that between his and his lover's professions. A chemist, he observes, cannot be careless, while a poet cannot be cautious. Hence, in order to wreak revenge against his beloved, he was obliged to trespass onto her turf. After all: "How does a chemist / revenge himself against a poet? / Synthesize a poem? Distil its essence? / Filter the impurities? / Evaporate it to dryness?"

The lovers were also separated by a financial gulf. Djerassi is admirably frank, genuinely funny, and impressively perceptive about the role played in their romance by his own extraordinary wealth—a "golden net" that, she apparently feared, could be either the kind of net that rescues or the kind that entraps.

But there was at least one thing the two of them had in common, and Djerassi, in the prose "Coda," underscores it by way of explaining his decision to publish this terribly intimate book. Middlebrook herself, he reminds us, was an outspoken champion of both the legitimacy and the usefulness of divulging even the most personal secrets of the deceased: some readers will recall that her Sexton book sparked a degree of literary controversy because it quoted freely from recordings of Sexton's sessions with her psychiatrist. According to Djerassi, Middlebrook often said: "The dead have no rights, only wishes. The dead cannot be shamed." He also quotes something she once told an interviewer: "The more that each of us knows about each of the other human beings in the world, the better off we are. It's true that it is very painful to be exposed to people's curiosity. But it's painful in a way that can only lead to self-knowledge, because in the scope of human endeavor, it's not a big deal." Djerassi concludes, then, that his spouse, if she were aware of the publication of *A Diary of Pique*, "would have smilingly approved." To reach the end of this book is to be certain that Djerassi knew Middlebrook

well enough to know exactly what she would have made of its publication—and to be certain, as well, that the unusually candid and self-knowing Djerassi is being honest about it, both with himself and with us.

"He is well on his way to becoming a classic poet," reads a quotation from Ray Olson of *Booklist* on the back cover of Dana Gioia's magnificent and long-awaited new collection, *Pity the Beautiful*.[4] Olson's observation, which is apparently drawn from a review of Gioia's previous book of poems, *Interrogations at Noon* (2001), is nothing more or less than the truth, but when I read it, it gave me pause. I lingered over it. I have known Gioia's work for more than half of my life; he began to compile his *oeuvre* about the same time I began to write seriously about poetry; certain lines of his work linger in my mind like lines from Shakespeare and Wordsworth and Hardy (or, for that matter, Cole Porter and Irving Berlin); over the decades I have seen wave after wave of his inferiors swipe ignorantly and/or jealously at his productions only to disappear back into the anonymous mob, or the mists of time.

And now—it should not be strange to think of it this way, for this is how life works, but it is, nonetheless, strange—this promising young poet of the day before yesterday is indeed one of today's masters of the genre, headed, ever more clearly, for whatever kind of immortality, in these prosaic times, awaits the best poets—those whose voices are unmistakable, whose visions have helped shape the way we make sense of the world, and whose lines and images continue to haunt us years after we first encountered them. In an era when American poetry has been the captive largely of narcissists who confuse poetry with therapy and of academics out to baffle and impress, Gioia has written poems that seek to connect with readers in a profoundly human way.

Yes, there is confession here, as there always has been in Gioia's work, but it is confession of the highest order, confession charged with intelligence and transformed utterly into art—a quiet, reflective species of confession which, even when the occasion is of the most terrible sort, points away from self-absorption to the universal condition of man and which, rather than staring admiringly into the mirror, looks upward—tentatively, pensively, wonderingly—in search of the solace of the divine and the hope of the eternal.

All of which is by way of saying that Gioia manages consistently to stare into his own darkest emotional depths and yet exercise perfect control over the way in which the things he discovers there find their way onto the page. Or to put this in slightly different words: many of his most memorable poems are made out of the most frightful kinds of pain and suffering—out of the sorts of experiences that can be debilitating, if not utterly soul-destroying, to even the hardiest of souls—and yet he has somehow succeeded in fashioning these poems, at once delicate and devastating, with the self-assurance of an authentic virtuoso.

[4] PITY THE BEAUTIFUL, by *Dana Gioia*. Graywolf Press. $15.00p.

And as if that were not enough, I hasten to add, he makes it all look deceptively simple. Like Frost. Like Larkin.

Precisely because he has swum against the current throughout his career, Gioia has not always received his due from many of those who rank poets and distribute awards. Yes, he won the American Book Award for *Interrogations at Noon.* But over the years his formal expertise has made him a prime target of those who consider rhyme and meter reactionary. It is interesting to imagine how Gioia would have been treated by the "poetry community" if, instead of staking his claim to attention on the actual merits of his work, he had sold himself, say, as a "Chicano poet." (His mother is Mexican-American.) Such strategems have certainly worked wonders for others far less talented than Gioia.

Then there's his professional background. For years, the poetry mafia counted it as a demerit against Gioia that he was a top executive for a major corporation; as if that weren't bad enough, he went on to accept the position of chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts under George W. Bush. Of course, it is one of the strengths of Gioia's poetry that he has moved in the great world beyond the urban and academic poetry ghettos, known it high and low and everywhere in between, and written about it neither with the condescension of a self-consciously Important Person nor the ersatz *nostalgie de la boue* of a son of the soil. He is the sum of everything he has been and has become, and he approaches his readers as, quite simply, a fellow wanderer on this earth, a fellow child of whatever god or gods there may be, a fellow mortal, ultimately naked and alone, every bit as puzzled and scared and questioning as they are, if (as it happens) rather more gifted than they are at articulating—and, perhaps, braver than many of them are at facing up to—the puzzlement, the fear, the questions.

Which brings us to *Pity the Beautiful*—and to its title poem, which, like Frost's "Provide, Provide," is a short, snappy reminder that even the comely grow old. Yet while Frost's poem is an argument that one should strive for worldly power and prosperity in order to avoid insult or obscurity in one's dotage, Gioia's poem is a cry of universal pity, both for those who have decayed ("Pity the faded, / the bloated, the blowsy . . .") and for those who inevitably will ("Pity the beautiful, / the dolls, and the dishes . . ."), for we're all on this road together.

If "Pity the Beautiful" recalls Frost, "The Angel with the Broken Wing" brings to mind Larkin's "Church Going" in that both ponder the significance of a church to nonbelievers. In Gioia's poem, however, the speaker is not a version of the poet himself but a statue of an angel who observes that

> . . . 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.

Though religion, specifically Catholicism, has always been at the very

least a murmuring background presence in Gioia's work, never before has his poetry been so saturated with the vocabulary of faith. A poem about California freeways calls them "the gods who rule the golden land"; another, "Shopping," set in a department store, describes it as "the temple of my people," full of "the altars of the gods," a place of "hushed aisles," of "visions shining under glass." Readers of contemporary poetry are familiar with the kind of poet who sneers glibly at consumerism—at, in other words, those vulgar types who aren't as highly evolved as he imagines himself to be. But that's not what's going on in "Shopping": far from insisting on the difference between himself and his materialistic yahoo inferiors, the speaker acknowledges the department store as "the temple of *my* people"; for him, the store is not an alien territory but part of his own world, in which he is ever struggling to reconcile the material and spiritual (even though he is clearly alert to the humor in the more quixotic aspects of this quest).

Pity the Beautiful is informed by a gratitude for sheer existence, for the consciousness that enables us to experience not just obvious blessings but also things that may not, at first blush, seem like blessings at all: "Blessed is the road that keeps us homeless. // Blessed are hunger and thirst, loneliness and all forms of desire. // Blessed is the pain that humbles us. / Blessed is the distance that bars our joy." For, this book reminds us, there are blessings we don't recognize as such until they have escaped our grasp: "Blessed is the love that in losing we discover." (Or, as another poem puts it: "Being happy is mostly like that. You don't see it up close. / You recognize it later from the ache of memory.") And it reminds us, too, that if heaven is perfect and eternal, imperfection and mortality are the very essence of the human condition. ("What native speech do we share but imperfection?") The book might well have been entitled *Memento Mori*—or *Carpe Diem*: looking through a box of old family letters and photographs, the speaker of one poem wants to cry out to his now-deceased parents, whom he sees, in one picture, sitting uneasily at a banquet: "*Get out there on the floor and dance! / You don't have forever.*" But then he feels the lesson turning back on himself: for, after all, he muses, the dead

> never let us forget that the line
> between them and us is only temporary.
> *Get out there and dance!* the letters shout
> adding, *Love always. Can't wait to get home!*
> And soon we will be. *See you there.*

Unlike Di Piero, Gioia is not afraid to make bushels full of general statements about life ("The tale is often wiser than the teller"; "Symbols betray us")—which is another way of saying that while Di Piero is content to focus on the quotidian particulars, Gioia compulsively peers beyond them in search of abiding patterns and eternal truths, even

though he thoroughly understands that to be human is to see—and then only with great struggle—as through a glass, darkly, and that the best we can hope or pray for may actually be a bout of melancholy, or a chill of trepidation, that focuses our minds, shutting out, if only for a brief while, the noise of the madding crowd and allowing us to experience the still, simple essence of a moment of being:

> O Lord of indirection and ellipses,
> ignore our prayers. Deliver us from distraction.
> Slow our heartbeat to a cricket's call.
>
> In the green torpor of the afternoon,
> bless us with ennui and quietude.
> And grant us only what we fear, so that
>
> Underneath the murmur of the wasp
> we hear the dry grass bending in the wind
> and the spider's silken whisper from its web.