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The Two Dana Gioias

Pity the Beautiful by Dana Gioia. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2012. 80pp.

For many poetry readers, and much of the public, Dana Gioia sprung full blown into prominence with the publication of his now-famous essay "Can Poetry Matter?" in *The Atlantic Monthly* in April 1991. A few, of course, already knew his impressive debut volume *Daily Horoscope* (Graywolf, 1986) or had run across his work in *Poetry*, *The Hudson Review*, or *The New Yorker*. But with "Can Poetry Matter?" Gioia took on the poetry establishment like a contemporary, more genial Randall Jarrell, pointing out the ways that the art had lost its audience, and its practitioners their way, all the time offering the sort of useful, clear-headed suggestions sure to generate either relief that the truth was finally told, or rage. Most of those in the latter group liked things as they were: who was this upstart who dared to speak his mind, and in a forum guaranteed to gain attention? Of the controversy, Gioia himself observes in the introduction to the tenth-anniversary edition of the eponymous volume that contains the essay,

> What stirred debate and even denunciation in some circles were assumptions that seemed to me utterly beyond argument—especially the notions that poetry had once been popular in the United States, that a larger and more diverse audience might be good for the art, and that contemporary poetry might occupy a meaningful place outside the university. I thought those propositions self-evident. Not everyone agreed.

That Gioia's remarks generated lively disagreement was a good thing: the presumptions of every art form need the occasional shaking up. But some in the poetry world now abruptly closed the door, making all sorts of wrong assumptions: the former corporate executive could not be a "real" poet; he must enjoy a privileged background; and because *The Hudson Review* ran Gioia's essay, "Notes on the New Formalism," about the revival of rhyme and meter, his agenda across the arts must surely be reactionary—or so thought those who considered free verse the only acceptable option.

In recent years, these assumptions have begun receding, in part due to Gioia's leadership of the NEA where his initiatives transcended any one aesthetic, and where he worked tirelessly for all who practice or enjoy the arts. Indeed, he is now our foremost spokesperson on behalf of a wide range of writers, artists, and musicians, a critic who has written compellingly of undervalued poets such as L.E. Sissman or Weldon Kees, promoted renewed interest in the work of titans such as Ray Bradbury, and brought greater notice to Kay Ryan or Ted Kooser, overlooked masters in our midst. Whether or not you always agree with Gioia, the fact is that, without him, we would lose one of the nation's most influential, and thoughtful, advocates for the arts.

Today, every serious poet or reader knows Dana Gioia's name. But what about the Dana Gioia who emerges in his poetry? This other Dana Goia—meditative, private, preoccupied

with time and loss—returns with his fourth book, *Pity the Beautiful*, an understated collection of deep feeling and great skill. As a poet, he is sparing with personal revelation, though some background is revealing. A Californian of Sicilian and Mexican descent, whose father drove a taxi and whose mother worked as an AT&T information operator, Gioia is unusual among his generation's poets. A practicing Catholic who gave up his job at General Foods for a life in poetry, he holds no M.F.A. and only recently accepted a regular academic post, as Judge Widney Professor of Poetry and Public Culture at U.S.C. These facts, though hardly a secret, do not register for all, yet they offer a glimpse of the poet who, for some, escapes detection. Responsive to the real world's landscape (especially that of the West Coast), pragmatic yet alert to faith's troubling mysteries, he views the world through metaphor, haunted by memory and loss, yet buoyed by a vision sympathetic and inclusive.

That vision is established early through "Angel with the Broken Wing." The speaker, silent in real life, is the angel carved by a forgotten Mexican artisan: once displayed in a country church, it is now exhibited in a museum: "The perfect emblem of futility." In rhymed quatrains quietly accomplished, Gioia imbues the art-object with the life its maker gave it. The angel, trapped on earth and unable to speak to God, stands "like a dead thing nailed to a perch,/a crippled saint," its history a memory that cannot be shared, except through the poem's playful artifice of self-disclosure.

Still, the poem raises important questions: what does art say to us, literally or figuratively, and how lasting is the labor or memory of those who make it? Essential, too, is the angel's cultural context: Latino, Catholic, Californian. The angel's skepticism is balanced by a faith the poet shares: "even the godless feel something in a church,/A twinge of hope, fear?.../An ancient memory they can't dismiss." Presiding over the book, then, is a work of art and faith, expressing regret at its lost past, steeped in a culture that Gioia shares.

Beyond the world that we know lies the supernatural, partly accessible through faith, yet beyond any orthodoxy: the realm of imagination and longing, a world of ghosts. "Prophecy"—"the first inkling/of what we ourselves must call into being"—regards this world with wry ambivalence, turning a cold eye toward the future, while God, our "Lord of indirection," decides which prayers to ignore. A meditation on lost love and the speaker's "Via Dolorosa," "Prophecy" lays the groundwork for one of Gioia's major poems, "Haunted," a ghost story in dramatic monologue.

Like the similarly ambitious "The Homecoming" (see *The Gods of Winter*, the poet's second book), "Haunted" is written in sardonic, self-questioning blank verse, a measure in which Gioia particularly shines, especially when a touching tenderness shows through. Comprising *Pity the Beautiful*'s entire third section, this disquieting narrative dissects the doomed relationship of the speaker and Mara—"brilliant, beautiful, refined./…And did I mention she was rich? And cruel?"—in order to confront forces beyond both faith and reason. Staying at her uncle's house in the Berkshires, the narrator and Mara find themselves quite comfortable among "Florentine bronzes, Belgian tapestries," and other signs of wealth that connect the house both to history and the world of the dead. After an argument, the lovers separate, and the narrator, suffering insomnia, encounters a spirit who "seemed at once herself and her own reflection," both present and absent before a man who isn't "scared—just full of wonder." The tension that Gioia sets up—one might even call it a choice—

between erotic opulence and tragic memory is especially telling given the book's title: though beautiful, Mara is pitiless, and the unnamed narrator flees the choice (and the poem) for a life of wandering that leads, finally, to a religious vocation that offers renewal. Only through faith can a man escape what haunts him, though faith's basis in an unseen world remains an open question.

Gioia's work also excels when he shows a lighter touch. The title poem is an example, a lighthearted *memento mori* about "[t]he hotties, the knock-outs,/the tens out of ten" who end up "bloated," "blowsy," and "paunchy." Gioia's bemused affection for fads, buzz words, and recent idioms, evident in previous books, is apparent here as well: in "Pity the Beautiful"; in "Four Songs," the skillful lyrics drawn from Gioia's stylish libretto *Tony Caruso's Final Broadcast*; "Shopping," in which elevated diction carries a "splendid clutter" of cell phones, polyester, cash machines, and Suburus; and in "The Heart of the Matter" which, in dactylic rhythms, leaps playfully from common expressions like "ghost of a chance" to the final stanza of regret over things used up or left undone:

> The dregs of the bottle, the end of the line,
> The laggard, the loser, the last one to know.
> The unfinished book, the dead-end sign,
> And last summer's garden buried in snow.

A longing for home, and a fear of return, lie at the core of *Pity the Beautiful*: like the broken artifact-angel whose lost history is known only to him (and us, while suspending disbelief), we, too, hold memories that are precious yet impermanent, as mortal as ourselves, and doomed. In fact, memory is Gioia's chief theme: it haunts and nourishes, hurts and restores order, tells us who we are, and reminds us who we're not. This last is another interest of the poet. Through vivid waterfront description, the sonnet "Cold San Francisco" imagines a reunion "that will never arrive." Equally moving are "The Apple Orchard"'s solemn tercets: "We had the luck, if you can call it that,/Of having been in love but never lovers." The memory of orchards treasured by the speaker is the backdrop for missed opportunity, another life that might have been:

> What more could I have wanted from that day?
> Everything, of course. Perhaps that was the point—
> To learn that what we will not grasp is lost.

This lesson, subtly varied, is conveyed in "Being Happy" ("You recognize it later from the ache of memory"), "Reunion" ("This is my past where no one knows me"), and, with distinction, in "The Road," a sonnet effortlessly balanced between angst and resignation: "He sometimes felt that he has missed his life/By being far too busy looking for it."

That even what we *will* grasp may be lost is just as devastating a lesson and nowhere more so than in Gioia's poems for the son who died of SIDS more than two decades ago. The author's words on this subject are deeply felt—resigned, meditative, unforgettable—and, for Gioia, unusual in their autobiographical directness. "In the Special Treatments Ward" opens, "So this is where the children come to die," only to question its own rhetoric: "What right had I whose son had walked away/to speak for those who died? And I'll admit/I

wanted to forget. I'd lost one child/and couldn't bear to watch another die." "Majority," a more direct elegy for the lost son, offers the spare observations of the father who has watched other boys grow up and now half-speaks, half-prays to the son's memory: "Now you are twenty-one./Finally, it makes sense/that you have moved away/into your own afterlife." Gioia's many poems of alternate roads and missed opportunities have an important counterpart in this quiet elegy for a life that was never lived at all.

For this reader, one very clear connection between Gioia the public figure and the author of *Pity the Beautiful* is its dedication to Morten Lauridsen—"one of the few living composers whom I would call great," Gioia observes in "Shining Light," Michael Stillwater's recently released documentary. Once again, Gioia the advocate shares his enthusiasm, offering support for an undervalued artist. Yet Dana Gioia the poet is due more recognition, too. His is a quiet, thoughtful voice steeped in the deepest human questions—a voice with ties to Elizabeth Bishop, Weldon Kees, and Robert Frost. The fierce intelligence and compassion of Gioia's work are rarely equaled, yet his characteristic restraint requires a fully attentive reading—not one distracted by poetry politics or long-ago aesthetic disagreements. This inescapably public man remains a deeply private poet whose work is sensitive, darkly funny, smart, and certain to prove lasting. –**NED BALBO**, *Loyola University Maryland*

BIO NOTE:
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