WHAT WE DARE CONFIDE:

A CANONICAL CASE FOR THE POETRY,

LITERARY CRITICISM,

AND PUBLIC ARTS ADVOCACY

OF DANA GIOIA

A dissertation submitted to the Caspersen School of Graduate Studies

of Drew University in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Letters

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Madison, New Jersey

May 2015

ABSTRACT

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The Caspersen School of Graduate Studies May 2015
Drew University

"I'm simply not famous enough," Dana Gioia playfully confessed in his commencement address at Stanford University, his alma mater, on June 17, 2007. The *raison d'être* for this dissertation is not to cultivate fame or celebrity for him but to elevate his canonical status principally as a poet, literary critic, and public arts exponent of surpassing, if under-appreciated, achievement. This dissertation applies the precepts of canonicity in Marjorie Garber's *The Use and Abuse of Literature,* Harold Bloom's *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life,* and several other sources to Gioia's key, integrated contributions to literary and other arts.

The central focus of scholarly attention here is Gioia's verse, in which he explores the tenet, absorbed from his Catholic faith, that adversity and loss can lead to greater humility, empathy, and commitment to change. His poetry also reveals and fosters a more profound appreciation of beauty—visible and invisible, penetrable and impenetrable—as part of an immanent, sacramental worldview. Moreover, a lambent wit, an engagingly brisk erudition, and a commanding grasp of prosody—nonce forms included—thread

through his poems, investing them with a level of achievement warranting the canonical argument laid out in this dissertation.

Besides his literary criticism and public arts advocacy, Gioia's NEA chairmanship during 2003-2009 and its unprecedented success in launching or boosting such programs as "Poetry Out Loud," "Operation Homecoming," and the Jazz Masters Fellowships are examined. Additionally discussed from his uncommon polymathy is its mutually nurturing effect on his mastery of such other component parts as translating, anthologizing, libretto composing, and authoring college textbooks.

Gioia's lingering reputation as a controversial critic and New Formalist still tends to overshadow disproportionately his other accomplishments and has consequently hindered situating him higher in overall cultural estimation. This dissertation combines fresh insight, new compositional information, and gleaned past scholarship to put forward the proposition that Dana Gioia's overdue canonical re-valuation need not and should not wait for posterity's judgment about his place on Parnassus.

DEDICATION

To Nancy,

my wife, my best friend, and the love of my life.

Her steady encouragement, Job-like patience, gentle prods,

and abiding trust have ensured the outcome we both desired.

Without her, I could not have done this dissertation,

nor could I have returned to graduate school in January 2005

to finish what was unfinished business for me.

She deserves far more than the immense gratitude I feel here.

I know how very lucky I am to have her love.

IN MEMORIAM

My parents,

Earle R. Hitchner Jr. (June 29, 1921 – November 1, 2004)

and Virginia M. Hitchner (January 1, 1924 – November 3, 2010),

wanted my doctorate as much as I did.

I hope they would have been pleased and proud that I achieved my goal.

My filial devotion burns ever brightly.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I suppose it is a cliché for a doctoral dissertation student to admit that the journey in reaching this point has been long and often tortuous. But clichés can still ring with truth, if not originality. Life certainly intervened in my journey, including an arduous relocation, and so did death, including the passing of my mother, my mother-in-law, and a nephew. Those three and many others helped me along the way, and I would be remiss if I did not mention them by name here.

First, I thank my two dissertation advisers and readers, Dr. Laura Winters and Dr. Philip Scibilia, for their patience, guidance, and support. At Drew University I had the good fortune to take a highly stimulating three graduate courses and tutorial with Dr. Winters as well as an engrossing graduate course with Dr. Scibilia. Their passion and skill for teaching and for cultivating insight convinced me that I could not have two better dissertation advisers and readers than them. I owe them so much.

In addition, I am grateful to these professors for fanning the spark within me to pursue literature as an academic concentration and writing as a continuous calling: Drew University's Dr. Virginia Phelan, with whom I took an enriching three graduate courses and tutorial; The City University of New York Lehman College's Dr. Patricia Cockram, the second reader of my M.A. thesis on playwright Sam Shepard and a talented teacher of modern poetry, and Dr. Mardi Valgemae, the adviser of my M.A. thesis and a gifted teacher of drama, whose surprise May 2006 graduation gift to me of his book *Accelerated Grimace: Expressionism in the American Drama of the 1920s* with its thoughtful inscription inside touched me deeply; the University of Pennsylvania's Dr. Don Graham,

Dr. Arthur "Joe" Scouten, and visiting instructor Dr. J. Saunders Redding from Cornell; and La Salle University's Charles Kelly, former English Department chairman, and Joseph Moran, my professor for Spanish and the moderator of my fraternity, Sigma Phi Lambda, never wavering in its commitment to boost campus spirit and community good works since 1935.

At Drew University, I also thank Dr. William Rogers, Associate Dean of the Caspersen School of Graduate Studies, for inviting me to teach "Old Modes, New Media: Journalism at a Crossroads," a graduate course I conceived for the fall semester of 2007. It was one of the most gratifying and fulfilling pedagogic experiences of my life, and I could not have asked for a more receptive and motivated group of students to teach. Without knowing it, they instilled in me the desire to become a doctoral student in the same graduate school during the following fall semester.

Additionally earning my gratitude is Bruce Lancaster, whose Sherlock Holmes-like tenacity in tracking down some fugitive articles for me ennobles his formal title of reference associate in the Reference and Research Services Department of the Drew University Library in Madison, New Jersey. For allowing me generous access to the Elizabeth Bishop Papers in the Archives and Special Collections housed on the ground floor of the Vassar College Main Library in Poughkeepsie, New York, I thank Head of Special Collections Ronald Patkus and Special Collections Assistant Dean Rogers. For interlibrary loans or overall helpfulness, I thank the staffs of the Margate City Public Library in Margate City, New Jersey, and the Pawling Free Library in Pawling, New York. And to manager Tara Lombardozzi and her staff at The Book Cove in Pawling, New York, I offer this heartfelt statement: The Book Cove epitomizes how valuable an

independent book store can be to any local community of engaged readers, including this doctoral dissertation writer.

For a host of reasons fully known to them and me, I thank Dr. Mick Moloney, Global Distinguished Professor of Irish Studies and Music at New York University; Joe Derrane, nonpareil button accordionist in Irish traditional music and one of two bona fide musical geniuses (the other is jazz saxophonist Sonny Rollins) I have met in the flesh; Séamus Connolly, ten-time All-Ireland solo fiddle champion as well as Sullivan Artist in Residence and music instructor at Boston College; Anthony Orlando, fellow graduate student and friend since 2005 when we met in the M.A. in English program at CUNY Lehman College; and Bob Drennen, fraternity brother and close friend since our undergraduate days at La Salle University.

I am also grateful to Terence Winch, a musician and author who won the American Book Award, Columbia Book Award, and Gertrude Stein Award for Innovative Writing, and was given an honorary doctorate of humane letters by his alma mater, Iona College, at its graduate school commencement ceremony in May 2014. His dedication of the poem "Application" to me in *This Way Out*, his 2014 book of verse, was unexpected and humbling. When I nervously asked Terence if I had inspired his poem's querulous narrator, he allayed my anxiety by explaining that the poem was a gesture of thanks for my submitting a nomination letter, or "application," on his behalf in May 2012 for a Presidential Distinguished Service Award for the Irish Abroad bestowed by the Irish government. Though he did not win, Terence still gave me permission to include the poem toward the end of these acknowledgments. Another reason I am grateful to him is that he brought me to the attention of poet and critic David Lehman at the Best American

Poetry website, where David invited me to be a guest blogger during October 23-29, 2011 (www.blog.bestamericanpoetry.com). It was my first experience as a literary blogger, and I enjoyed it thoroughly.

Among the many authors I could cite as early, pivotal influences in my own scribal life, I must single out F. Scott Fitzgerald for *The Great Gatsby*, published in 1925. This inimitable novel of America has rewarded my obsessive re-reading since high school and shaped my understanding of what writing can be.

My two brothers, Jim and Joe Hitchner, and their families; my aunt Thelma Reid; and my sister-in-law Becky Reed, mother-in-law Amy Lee Reed (April 25, 1926 – October 20, 2013), and father-in-law John Reed (September 25, 1924 – January 27, 2006) have all played roles, however unsuspectingly, in steering me to my doctorate. Thank you.

I believe my paternal grandparents, Earle R. Hitchner Sr. (September 14, 1892 – February 8, 1970) and Mary C. Hitchner (January 20, 1894 – February 3, 1983), and my godmother and aunt, Geraldine Wallace (June 14, 1918 – August 30, 1976), hovered like seraphim as I wrote this dissertation. So, too, did my sister, Debbie (March 26, 1954 – May 18, 1958), who left me with glowing memories from the short wick of time we had together. My nephew Jason Hitchner (December 19, 1987 – March 9, 2011) also departed much too soon yet remains an inspiring presence for me.

Finally, to Dana Gioia, the subject of my dissertation, I offer my profound gratitude for the postal mailings, phone calls, and more than 700 confidential e-mails exchanged between us. His tolerant responses to my frequently pesky questions, acts of unsolicited solicitude and random thoughtfulness, and overall cooperation and

availability—even when coping with deadlines of his own—made my study of his accomplishments a fulfilling and fruitful undertaking. His unbending refusal to influence or intrude on my independent scholarly inquiry typifies his integrity. I hope this dissertation reflects my own.

APPLICATION
by Terence Winch

for earle hitchner

Temporary gods, forget how old I am.
Consider only that people say they feel
good in my embrace. Please take that
into account when making your decision.

In addition, I have given my friends pain
relievers and stress reducers. I have bought
them drinks when it wasn't even my round.
I have praised them in ways that could be
considered over the top, just to soothe
their weary souls, their tattered psyches.
Surely that should count for something.

I buy people lunch all the time and I name
things after them, even when I have no authority
to do this. I do it solely out of love, out of the recognition
that they deserve to be remembered forever,
even if only on a little brass tag on the back
of a chair in a dark theater no one goes to.

As you weigh the pros and cons, ye Mighty,
I beseech you to please cut me some slack.
I admit I have not always been so admirable.
I have cut corners, lied, cheated, stolen,
maligned, malfeased, faked it, taken the easy
way out. Maybe there is no excuse for me.
I accept that. But I ask you, when you are
deliberating over my case, to remember
that anyone saying bad things about me is
most likely an even worse cheat and liar.

UNSAID
by Dana Gioia

So much of what we live goes on inside—
The diaries of grief, the tongue-tied aches
Of unacknowledged love are no less real
For having passed unsaid. What we conceal
Is always more than what we dare confide.
Think of the letters that we write our dead.

Chapter 1

JUMP FOR GIOIA

"I contain multitudes." – Walt Whitman

The power of verse to console and heal—what poet Kevin Young calls "a poetry of necessity" (xv)—could not be more apparent than at the televised lower Manhattan ceremony marking the ninth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. On September 11, 2010, before thousands of relatives, friends, and sympathizers gathered to remember the thousands[1] who died, U.S. Vice President Joseph Biden quoted from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Builders," New Jersey Governor Chris Christie quoted from Langston Hughes's "Dreams," then-New York Governor David Paterson quoted from Sri Chinmoy's "Hope Knows No Fear," former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani quoted from Alfred Tennyson's "Ulysses," and former New York Governor George Pataki quoted from Ralph Waldo Emerson's "A Nation's Strength."

In his own remarks then-New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg quoted the work of four U.S. writers. The first was Archibald MacLeish, from whose poem "The Sheep in the Ruins" the mayor cited these elided lines: "Even among the ruins shall begin the work, / Large in the level morning of the light. . . . One man in the sun alone / Walks

[1] As of May 2011, the official death toll was 2,752, according to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner of New York City. See pp. xxxiv and 293 in Jim Dwyer and Kevin Flynn's *102 Minutes: The Unforgettable Story of the Fight to Survive Inside the Twin Towers* (New York: Times Books, 2011). Another 184 people died when American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the Pentagon, and 40 more perished when United Airlines Flight 93 crashed into a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. See pp. xxvi and 350 in David Friend's *Watching the World: The Stories Behind the Images of 9/11* (New York: Picador, 2011).

between the silence and the stone." The second writer was Matthew Shenoda, from whose poem "Donkey Carts and Desolation" the mayor chose these lines: "Ingenuity is the notion of building / On a foundation made from loss." The third author was Willa Cather, from whose novel *O Pioneers!* the mayor took this line: "The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman." Bloomberg described the fourth writer as "one of our best-loved poets" and quoted these lines from his poem "Entrance": "Whoever you are: step out of doors tonight, / Out of the room that lets you feel secure. / Infinity is open to your sight. / Whoever you are."[2]

That last author is Dana Gioia (pronounced "JOY-uh"), who became the subject of my dissertation before Bloomberg's public citation of him. Appearing in Gioia's third volume of verse, *Interrogations at Noon,* "Entrance" is his English translation of "Eingang," a poem written in German by Rainier Maria Rilke.

I suspect many of the speakers and spectators at the ceremony were unaware that Dana Gioia faced a similar challenge nine years earlier: what to say about the devastation of September 11, 2001. His scheduled speaking tour of Southern California began the next morning, and his first appearance was in front of an overflow crowd. In his essay "'All I Have Is a Voice': September 11th and American Poetry," he recalled the moment and the demands it made on him:

> I realized then how hungry people were for what poetry offered. It seemed inappropriate to spend the hour simply reading my own work. What I attempted—not only then but all week—was to address the public

[2] All of the literary passages recited that day and their sources can be found in *September Morning: Ten Years of Poems and Readings from the 9/11 Ceremonies New York City* (Brooklyn: powerHouse Books, 2012), compiled and edited by Sara Lukinson.

> situation but not be held captive by it. The most important thing I could do, it seemed, was to reaffirm amid the deafening clamor of political events the importance of poetry and the imagination. (*Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture* 164)

Gioia began each tour appearance by reciting W. H. Auden's "September 1, 1939," a poem ruminating on the outbreak of the Second World War. Such anguished lines as "The unmentionable odour of death / Offends the September night" can just as easily describe September 11, 2001, and Auden, in a sense, provides balm for both with this pleading line: "We must love one another or die" (*Selected Poems* 95, 97). As poet and critic David Orr stated in *Beautiful & Pointless: A Guide to Modern Poetry,* "Auden's poem has few rivals among the poetry associated with September 11" (56). Although Gioia was not the only writer who chose to read "September 1, 1939" in response to September 11, 2001, he was among the first to recognize the applicability of Auden's poem to that tragedy. "At times of enormous joy or grief people instinctively long for great language to express and commemorate their emotions," Gioia noted in "'All I Have Is a Voice'" (*Disappearing Ink* 166).[3]

Of course, I was surprised—and delighted—that then-New York City Mayor Bloomberg inadvertently validated my dissertation, the purpose of which is to present a strong analytic case for elevating Dana Gioia's oeuvre in the canon of contemporary

[3] A poem directly inspired by the tragedy of September 11, 2001, is Billy Collins's "The Names," the last eleven lines of which were read by then-New York City Mayor Bloomberg at the 2003 ceremony and by former New York Governor Pataki at the 2011 ceremony. The poem concludes: "So many names, there is barely room on the wall of the heart" (*Aimless Love* 256). Perhaps the most powerful poem written about the tragedy and not recited at the annual 9/11 ceremony in Manhattan is Wisława Szymborska's "Photograph from September 11," depicting in mid-descent those who jumped from the burning Twin Towers. The poem concludes: "I can only do two things for them— / describe this flight / and not add a last line" (*Monologue of a Dog* 69).

American letters and public advocacy for the arts. Gioia's achievements as a champion of diverse arts, especially during his chairmanship of the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts (2003-2009), are of signal importance and enduring influence in American culture. The concept of canonicity should be flexible enough to encompass those who have made key contributions to public awareness of and access to the arts.

The impetus for this dissertation gained momentum from Marjorie Garber's 2011 book, *The Use and Abuse of Literature.* In it she defines "literary canon" as "a body of works considered centrally important and worthy of study" (58) and states that works achieving canonical status "should be alive to us, which means that they grow and change as the times change and readers change. If they are immobile, marmoreal, and untouchable, venerated rather than read and interpreted, then they are no longer literary and no longer living" (75). Garber adds that "the indubitable and indisputable pleasures of the canon are pleasures of rereading"[4] (75) and that "the concept of a literary canon conversation across the continents and centuries is more important than ever" (76).

Of equal pertinence to this dissertation is another point made by Garber, a professor of English at Harvard University since 1981:

[4] Seventeen years earlier, in his book *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages,* Harold Bloom was more emphatic: "One ancient test for the canonical remains fiercely valid: unless it demands rereading, the work does not qualify" (29). In her book *On Rereading*, published in the same year as Garber's *The Use and Abuse of Literature,* University of Virginia Professor Emerita of English Patricia Meyer Spacks states that rereading offers "for most readers an experience of repeated unexpected change," which "occurs not only as a result of noticing new details but also because interpretations alter" (2-3). She adds: "The more I understand, the more I enjoy. The more questions I ask of myself and of the book, the more I can see; the more I see, the more I feel. Rereading, for me, is a process of heightened attention, even when it feels most relaxed" (16). As Verlyn Klinkenborg summarizes: "The words never change, but the reader always does" ("Some Thoughts on the Pleasures of Being a Re-Reader," www.nytimes.com/2009/5/30).

> At Harvard in the early 1980s undergraduate English majors were not permitted to write their senior theses on writers who were still living. I'm not sure why—perhaps the idea was that the critical verdict had not yet been definitively rendered on these writers, since their careers were still in motion, or that there was not sufficient critical writing (essays, critical books and articles, reviews, etc.) for a young scholar to consult and assess. But times have changed. (182-83)

Implicitly disagreeing with Garber's point is poet and critic Michael Robbins, who stated that "it is impossible to judge the worth and durability of contemporary production" in the July/August 2013 issue of *Poetry* magazine (390). Obviously I disagree with Robbins and concur with Garber. Scholarly verdicts on living writers can only start to congeal when scholars themselves start to shed their timidity about possibly being early and wrong in their judgments. Waiting for consensus is not the same as helping to build it.

Garber's observation that "times have changed," however, does not necessarily make easier the challenge of a living writer as a thesis or dissertation subject. As novelist John Irving wryly cautioned, "It's better to read a good writer than meet one" (8). A living subject, unlike a dead one, can sometimes frustrate more than facilitate analysis of his or her work. Also, lingering from the former literary hegemony of New Criticism is the notion that the text, not the author, should be the exclusive domain of examination. Consequently, some scholars weaned on New Criticism still shy away from direct contact with a living subject—an attitude that I, a professional journalist for decades, find baffling. Though off the record, my voluminous correspondence and occasional phone

calls with Gioia provided insights and information about his work and working habits that I might otherwise have never obtained. To put it another way: If Shakespeare were alive today, would scholars who still cling to New Criticism precepts avoid speaking to him about his plays and sonnets?

But another danger lurks in communicating with a living subject: subtle sway or manipulation. Silky cajolery can be just as problematic as stubborn obstructionism. To his distinct credit, Dana Gioia's general helpfulness to me never slipped into attempts to shape my judgments and opinions of his work. He always greeted my volunteered interpretations of his poetry with respectful interest but no sign of overt assent that could risk stamping them as definitive or superior to all other possible ones. Part of the pleasure he derives as a poet is noting so many diverse reactions to his verse.

That multiplicity of response supports Marjorie Garber's assertion that "no interpretation of literature is 'final' or 'definitive'" and that "literary study, like literature, is a process rather than a product" (259). The more meanings a literary work generates, the more they bolster "the living presence of the literary work in culture, society, and the individual creative imagination" (283). In that sense, adds Garber, "literature reads us as much as we read literature" (143). Dana Gioia is aware of that mutual, nurturing effect. It is why he believes that every literary work he finishes no longer belongs to him but to everyone else.

Like Garber's *The Use and Abuse of Literature,* Harold Bloom's *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life* was published in 2011 and similarly supplied theoretical support for my dissertation.[5] To Bloom, strangeness "is *the* canonical quality,

[5] Since the 1960s, canon scholarship has steadily evolved into a field of inquiry unto itself. For a succinct history, see the entry "CANON" on pages 186-88 in the latest (fourth) edition of *The Princeton*

the mark of sublime literature. . . . Strangeness is uncanniness: the estrangement of the homelike or commonplace. This estrangement is likely to manifest itself differently in writers and readers" (19). The paradox of strangeness is that it is both familiar and unfamiliar in effect, making the quotidian seem extraordinary and the mysterious seem apprehensible through freshly imagined representation. It is not cultivating strangeness for strangeness's sake, which can easily turn into a crutch or gimmick, but instead a deftly delineated revelation of what is often overlooked, taken for granted, or otherwise hidden in plain sight. "The sublime conveys imaginative power and weakness at once," Bloom further explains. "It transports us beyond ourselves, provoking the uncanny recognition that one is never fully the author of one's work or one's self" (20). Bloom is not suggesting an authorial surrender of control to achieve strangeness and sublimity, but instead an authorial openness and heightened receptivity to the potential, however inchoately glimpsed, for both strangeness and sublimity in the composition of any literary work.

At the outset of his foreword for *The Best American Poetry 2011*, an annual anthology for which he is series editor, poet and critic David Lehman poses two questions: "What makes a poem great? What standards do we use for judging poetic excellence?" (ix). He responds with three preliminary criteria for determining great poems: "They give pleasure, sustain interest, and compel a second reading" (xi). But in his introduction to the 2006 edition of *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*, which he

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Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics or the entry "canon" on pages 86-88 in Edward Hirsch's *A Poet's Glossary*. Among the more helpful dissertations within this field of inquiry that I consulted for my own dissertation are Corbett Upton's "Canon and Corpus: The Making of American Poetry" and Ginger Rodriguez's "Canons in the Classroom: Interrogating Value in the American Literary Tradition."

selected and edited, Lehman poses two questions suggesting a scale of more refined differentiation: "What makes a poem good? What makes a good poem great?" (xi). There he replies with a longer list of criteria: "eloquence, passion, intelligence, conviction, wit, originality, pride of craft, an eye for the genuine, an ear for speech, an instinct for the truth" (xi).[6]

In *Poetry and the Age,* his highly influential book of literary criticism in 1953, Randall Jarrell states that "a good poet is someone who manages, in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms, to be struck by lightning five or six times; a dozen or two dozen times and he is great" (148). Critic Joseph Epstein offers a different metaphor and numerical benchmark: "If a poet can hit the gong six or seven times, leaving behind that number of great poems, his claim to immortality, it has been said, is assured" (*Life Sentences* 69). If Jarrell's and Epstein's criteria can be added to Lehman's criteria, "a dozen or two dozen" of Gioia's poems qualify as at least good and, I will argue, significantly beyond that.

James Longenbach, another poet and critic, provides a much simpler criterion: "I return to the poem, a good poem, because I want to know how it feels to learn again what

[6] In "Poetic Boom?," his review of this anthology for the April 16, 2006, *New York Times Book Review,* poet and critic William Logan quoted the same Lehman comment, caustically describing it as "more gaseous blather than any anthologist has fit into one sentence for a long time" (14). No doubt still smarting from Logan's sting, Lehman in his foreword to *The Best American Poetry 2009* struck back: "William Logan typifies the bilious reviewer of our day. He has attacked, viciously, a great many American poets; I, too, have been the object of his scorn. Logan is the critic as [Frank] O'Hara defined the species: 'the assassin of my orchards.' You can rely on him to go for the most wounding gesture" (xiv). Dana Gioia's own stance on critiquing can be gleaned from his essay "Can Poetry Matter?" in the May 1991 issue of *The Atlantic:* "The reviewers of fifty years ago knew that their primary loyalty must lie not with their fellow poets or publishers but with the reader. Consequently they reported their reactions with scrupulous honesty, even when their opinions might lose them literary allies and writing assignments" (103).

I already know" ("Why Is a Good Poem Good?" 173).[7] Longenbach's use of "good" can easily extend to "great," and either label can apply to several Gioia poems, as this dissertation will show.[8] Garber's and Bloom's prior points about the urge to reread as the *sine qua non* of canonicity align with Longenbach's point: To be freshly enlightened and riveted by a poem during re-readings is strong evidence of its evergreen appeal and achievement.

"A good poem alters you," succinctly states poet Jane Hirshfield (Moyers 97). "Make something powerful enough to take its place among the poems I love" is the motivation behind the verse of poet Jeffrey Skinner (156). Poet and essayist Donald Hall typically pulls no punches: "I see no reason to spend your life writing poems unless your goal is to write great poems" ("Poetry and Ambition" 90). In his dual roles as a writer and critic of poetry, Robert Hass ponders "the way poems happen in a life when they are lived with, rather than systematically studied. Or alternately studied and lived with, and in that way endlessly reconceived" (*What Light Can Do* 13). Scholar Mark Edmundson describes a poem as "a moment of illumination" able to "slake a reader's thirst for meanings that pass beyond the experience of the individual poet and light up the world we hold in common" (64).

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[7] Longenbach's statement in 2011 may have been inspired by this one from Robert Frost in 1939: "For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew" ("The Figure a Poem Makes," *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays* 777).

[8] A staff writer for *The New Yorker* whose books of essays are consistent best sellers, Malcolm Gladwell relied on computer number crunching to conclude that "ten thousand hours is the magic number of greatness," that is, the minimum investment of intense, sustained practice time for anyone to achieve "true world-class expertise" in anything (*Outliers: The Story of Success* 41, 40). Even by that quirky calculus, Dana Gioia has attained "true world-class expertise" in poetry.

My own criterion for good-to-great verse worthy of canonical stature is this: In each rereading you discover something new. It can be a fleetly subtle rhyme, a soupçon of musicality, a hermetic metaphor suddenly cracked open in meaning, or an oblique but no less profound insight. It can also be more dramatic and sweeping, such as a rethinking of the entire poem, or a *frisson* leading to a fresh layer of understanding that does not collide with but instead complements what was once deemed complete and sacrosanct in the mind.

But making the case to raise the canonical appreciation of Dana Gioia's work needs to be tempered by a sense of proportion. To place his verse on the same empyreal plane as that of Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, or Emily Dickinson, for example, would be unfair to all concerned, especially Gioia. In re-evaluating the verse of Gioia, who regards himself as a poet first and foremost, I argue for fresh canonical consideration, not canonization. His position on Parnassus will always be subject to further, intense debate as well as the verdict and, at times, vicissitudes of posterity.

As former director of the Aspen Institute's Harman-Eisner Program in the Arts, a post he accepted following six hugely productive years as chairman of the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts, Gioia acknowledged a literary superior at the onset of an Aspen Institute Washington Ideas Roundtable Series conversation he conducted with poet Kay Ryan in the nation's capital on May 18, 2010. Sitting in the audience was Richard Wilbur, a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning poet (in 1957 and 1989), an acclaimed translator (his English-language versions of Molière's *The Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe* are deemed masterpieces in their own right), and the principal lyricist for Leonard Bernstein's comic operetta *Candide,* described by eight-time Tony Award-winning

composer Stephen Sondheim as "the most scintillating set of songs yet written for the musical theater" (*Finishing the Hat* 324). After Ryan bowed from the waist in deference toward Wilbur, Gioia broke his longstanding public silence about singling out the top poet alive in the United States: "As [NEA] chairman, I was always being interviewed by reporters, and they would say, 'Who do you think is the best living American poet?' And I would give the official answer: 'There are many diverse and generous talents in this great nation.' And they'd say, 'C'mon, c'mon, who do you think really is it?' And finally I said, 'If I have to pick one, no contest, Richard Wilbur'" (www.aspeninstitute.org/video/conversation-us-poet-laureate-kay-ryan).[9] Gioia received no dissenting look from Ryan, who in 2011 would earn a Pulitzer Prize of her own for *The Best of It: New and Selected Poems*; receive in the same year a MacArthur Fellowship, dubbed "genius grant," which provided a no-strings-attached stipend of $500,000[10] in support of future work; and in 2013 be awarded a National Humanities Medal from President Barack Obama in the East Room of the White House.

Any questions of canonicity, of ranking poets or designating them "major" or "minor," however, can quickly deteriorate into squabbles stemming less from disinterested, thoughtful exegesis than from dismissive, binary taxonomy ("rhymed" and "unrhymed," "closed" and "open," "cooked" and "raw," "traditional" and "avant-garde," "mainstream" and "experimental," and "formalism" and "free verse"). Such terms can imply combative, not complementary, values and thinly veiled taste preferences, and

[9] In his essay "Richard Wilbur: A Critical Survey of His Career," which first appeared in *World Poets, Volume 3*, edited by Ron Padgett, Dana Gioia both expands and details his praise. See "Richard Wilbur" listed under "Reviews and Author's Notes" in "Essays" at www.danagioia.net.

[10] The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation increased the MacArthur Fellowship stipend to $625,000 in 2013.

even devolve into political, not poetic, categorization, most notably "conservative" and "liberal." The ultimate danger of these labels is to segregate and then praise or pan verse by relying on procrustean beds of ideology, theory, and aesthetic movements.

In considering the primary aesthetic movements of literature since the middle of the twentieth century, poet and essayist Anne Stevenson criticized what she called an overshadowing of "isms," which "are creations of academics, not writers. If we seek to dispel the smoke and rescue poetry from ideology, it would be folly to cover ourselves defensively with academic fug" ("The Trouble with a Word Like Formalism" 217). Elsewhere in that essay, she urges readers to "approach poems boldly, at first hand, without recourse to specialist introductions that suggest, in many cases, that a poet's *name* summarizes some inflexible positions in a hierarchy of 'importance'" (219).

In his introduction to *New Italian Poets,* a 1991 anthology he edited with Michael Palma, Dana Gioia, like Anne Stevenson, believes that "what makes a superb poem work is often its ability to defy easy categorization" (4). He also states that *New Italian Poets* "lets American readers concentrate directly on the poems themselves without too many critical preconceptions" (5-6).

Despite Stevenson's strong preference for examining verse untethered to "isms," poetry anthologies assigned as textbooks usually supply them. The assumption is that students need this context to comprehend and appreciate verse more completely, and it is hard to argue with that general stance. But above these "isms" should be one simple, vaulting question: Are the poems *qua* poems lastingly good? Just because they appear in an anthology does not mean they are impervious to future vagaries of taste and

devaluation in esteem. Posterity in particular can be tough on some poets whose work was lauded in the past.

Consider the posthumous literary reputations of two poets and friends, Robert Lowell (1917-1977) and Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979). Poet and essayist Christian Wiman, who was born in 1966, is blunt: "It seems inarguable that Lowell's reputation has declined since his death. . . . If Lowell has influenced poets of my generation, it is only in the most casual, least enduring ways" (*Ambition and Survival: Becoming a Poet* 148). In contrast, Wiman strongly implies Bishop is now Lowell's superior. "Rare is the poet like Bishop, who sustained the high quality of her verse throughout her life" (92), he points out, adding that she "had the greater influence on subsequent American poets" (149).

The assessment of Lowell by Dana Gioia, who was born in 1950, is less harsh than Wiman's but basically agrees with it. In his essay "Elizabeth Bishop: From Coterie to Canon," originally published in the April 2004 issue of *The New Criterion*, Gioia explains "how Elizabeth Bishop came—slowly and surprisingly—to be considered the most highly esteemed American poet of the mid-twentieth century. Had I been discussing the leading midcentury poet thirty years ago, my subject would necessarily have been Robert Lowell, who at that moment enjoyed an indisputable preeminence among his contemporaries" (19).[11] Adding tang to that assertion is the fact that Gioia, as a graduate student in comparative literature at Harvard, could have taken a seminar in nineteenth-

[11] In *Eight American Poets: An Anthology,* published in 1994, editor Joel Conarroe refers to Bishop "as perhaps the most significant and enduring poet of her generation" (31) that includes Lowell, whose verse Conarroe pertinaciously describes "as intelligent and polished a body of work as any American poet has produced" (71).

century poetry taught by Lowell but chose instead a course in modern poetry taught by Bishop during the spring semester of 1975. As Gioia related in Fountain and Brazeau's *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop*, his course choice ran counter to the prevailing opinion on campus back then: "Whereas Lowell was a cultural hero at Harvard, Bishop was considered an eccentric minor figure" (296).

How the literary reputations of Lowell and Bishop have inverted posthumously is a cautionary tale of the mutability of the canon's implicit pecking order.[12] The title of Gioia's essay "Elizabeth Bishop: From Coterie to Canon" suggests as much, and his February 5-6, 2011, *Wall Street Journal* review of Bishop's *Poems* and *Prose* as well as *Elizabeth Bishop and The New Yorker: The Complete Correspondence* contains this lucid insight into Bishop's verse:

> Her work is never pretentious or inflated. Preternaturally observant, quietly inventive, detached but compassionate, Bishop created poems that seem unnervingly real. We see the place, the person or the thing as if we were truly there, and we feel emotions that the author doesn't state overtly but slyly awakens inside us. ("Wherever Home May Be" C5)

In the same review Gioia acknowledges that "Elizabeth Bishop's future reputation will surely fluctuate slightly according to the currents of taste, but she has indisputably won a permanent place in the American literary canon" (C6).[13]

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[12] In "Go Giants," a review of Lawrence Buell's book *The Dream of the Great American Novel* in the April 21, 2014, issue of *The New Yorker,* Adam Gopnik counterintuitively tucks in this statement about the two poets: "When you read the letters of Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop today, you are startled to realize that, in their day, Lowell was a god and Bishop still very much an aspirant, a judgment that has been turned on its head now. . . . No one biography, no one critical text, no one 'reading,' and certainly no one publisher altered the view; readers altered it by reading and then talking to one another" (104).

[13] For critic B. K. Fischer, how high a place can be deduced from an August 8, 2013, interview she conducted with poet and critic Maureen N. McLane in the *Boston Review*, where Fischer included

Born in 1950, William Logan believes "readers admire Robert Lowell . . . but they fall helplessly in love, over and over, with Elizabeth Bishop" (*Our Savage Art: Poetry and the Civil Tongue* 111).[14] In his mind, that largely accounts for Bishop's literary profile continuing to soar and Lowell's literary profile continuing to sink in comparison. But Logan is by no means ready to concede Lowell's lesser reputation: "Lowell was the most brilliant poet of the postwar period. If he remains out of fashion, our postmodern day loathes poetry that refuses to be easy or clever. . . . An editor with a fresh and severe eye must produce the selected edition of Lowell's work now desperately needed" (*Our Savage Art* 218). Perhaps that future selected edition coveted by Logan will, in effect, rehabilitate Lowell's literary reputation and cause it to re-ascend in the canon.[15]

In the "Introduction" written by Logan and Gioia for *Certain Solitudes: On the Poetry of Donald Justice*, a book co-edited by them, they imply how dilatory the canon can be in accepting change:

> Literary culture, for all its whims and sudden moods, loves nothing more than a settled judgment and is slow to appreciate a poet whose gains and

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Elizabeth Bishop among such "canonical greats" as Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and Gertrude Stein ("Her Poets," www.bostonreview.net/poetry/her-poets).

[14] Maureen N. McLane would doubtlessly agree with the second part of Logan's observation. In *My Poets*, a 2012 National Book Critics Circle Award finalist in autobiography/memoir, she states: "People make friends over Bishop and enemies over Lowell" (45).

[15] In contrast to Logan's urging of a compact selected edition of Lowell's verse, the 985-page *Elizabeth Bishop: Poems, Prose, and Letters* was published by the Library of America in 2008. The LOA, dedicated to "keeping permanently in print authoritative editions of America's best and most significant writing" (981), has yet to publish a similar comprehensive volume for Robert Lowell. Even so, like Logan, poet Donald Hall in his 2014 book, *Essays after Eighty*, believes a resuscitation is in the offing: "Lately we have not been hearing much about Robert Lowell, who when he died was at the top of the mountain. We will hear of Lowell again" (103).

> attractions are cumulative, whose work has never suffered, or contrived, a radical breach. It is only in the past decade that Elizabeth Bishop, long considered a poet's poet, a sly and delightful artificer of surfaces, has begun to seem as profound and as disturbing a poet as Robert Lowell. (xvii)[16]

The opening part of that statement now appears prophetic regarding Gioia's own literary reputation, which also rests on "gains and attractions" that "are cumulative."

This dissertation attempts not to rehabilitate but to re-evaluate and re-value canonically Dana Gioia's poetry as well as his literary criticism and public arts advocacy. Admittedly it is a bold step, inviting stumble, yet the circumstantial evidence of spotty neglect, inadequate attention, or splintered focus[17] is sufficient to warrant this re-examination of Gioia's work. And poetry anthologies are as good a place to start as any. According to poet and University of Virginia Professor Lisa Russ Spaar, "Anthologies play a huge role in determining which poets from the past are passed along to current and future readers of poetry, and which are not" (www.lareviewofbooks.org). Randall Jarrell

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[16] *Certain Solitudes* was published in 1997 when the inversion of Lowell's and Bishop's literary reputations arguably had not yet congealed.

[17] This "splintered focus" includes several master's theses and doctoral dissertations tending to explore Gioia not as a singular figure of multiple skills but as an individual with an isolatable role, such as critic, New Formalism spearhead, NEA chairman, librettist, or poet whose verse has been adapted to music. Among these theses and dissertations that I examined are William Walsh's "Loose Talk and Literary History: Language Poetry, New Formalism, and the Construction of Taste in Contemporary American Poetry," Amy Milakovic's "The National Endowment for the Arts' *Operation Homecoming*: Shaping Military Stories into Nationalistic Rhetoric," Jason Guriel's "Making It New: Creating an Audience for Poetry," Sarah Snydacker's "The New American Song: A Catalog of Published Songs by 25 Living American Composers," Timothy Shaner's "Working Form: The Poetics of Writing Work," Julie Porter's "Beyond McPoetry: Contemporary American Poetry in the Institutionalized Creative Writing Program Era," and Sarah Holman's "*Nosferatu:* Silence to Sound." Of special note is Lucy Hoyt's "Becoming a Redwood: A Genealogy of Expression in Dana Gioia's Poetry and Lori Laitman's Song Cycle," which recapitulates Gioia's different talents within an adroit detailing of the poetic-musical collaboration between Laitman and him.

was equally matter-of-fact: “The average reader knows poetry mainly from anthologies” (*Poetry and the Age* 170). So they often serve as an important early gateway to individual poets and to diverse verse in general, and impressionable students frequently regard anthologies as *de facto* threshers of quality, whether for one time or all time. Consequently, inclusion can confer stature, while exclusion can confound it. That is why peering into a cross-section of prominent anthologies for Gioia’s poems should prove revealing.

In Nicholson Baker’s novel *The Anthologist,* an often acidly humorous take on the challenge of choosing verse for a new omnibus, poet-protagonist-narrator Paul Chowder, whose surname implies how lumpy a stew the whole anthologizing process can be, poses his own question and terse answer on the subject of selectivity: “What does it mean to be a great poet? It means that you wrote one or two great poems. Or great parts of poems. That’s all it means” (101). But Chowder subsequently qualifies his qualification for “great poet” status with a sardonic remark: “Nobody will give them [poets] the ‘great poet’ label if they write just two great poems and nothing else. Even if they’re the two greatest poems ever. But it’s perfectly okay, in fact it’s typical, if ninety-five percent of the poems they write aren’t great. Because they never are” (102). Or as Donald Hall succinctly observes: “We judge the great poets by their great work, not by averaging successes and failures” (“Notes and Notices,” *Death to the Death of Poetry* 110).

Some of the most moving and exquisitely crafted poems written over the past three decades can be found in Gioia’s four published books of verse: *Daily Horoscope* in 1986, *The Gods of Winter* in 1991, *Interrogations at Noon* in 2001, and *Pity the Beautiful*

in 2012.[18] But despite former New York City Mayor Bloomberg's tagging of Dana Gioia as "one of our best-loved poets" during the ninth-anniversary remembrance of 9/11/01, there appear to be as many anthologies without his poems[19] as anthologies with them.

Published in 1996, the fourth edition of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry,* edited by Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy, includes Gioia's "Prayer" from *The Gods of Winter*, and the fifth edition, published in 2004, features both "Prayer" and "The Next Poem" from the same volume of verse by Gioia. As the editors' preface to the fifth edition states: "In addition to expanding representation, we have reconsidered, and in some instances reselected, the work of poets retained from earlier editions" (1x). Their renewed scrutiny of previously featured poets, along with their inclusion of seventeen new poets, fortifies the impression that Gioia's reputation had risen to some extent during the eight years between editions.

Still, Gioia's work is absent from the eighth edition (2011) and shorter eighth edition (2012) of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature,* as well as the ninth edition (2012) of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* and the ninth edition (2013) of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, *The Major Authors*. Why are those anthologies so important to canonicity? "Since it first appeared in 1962, *The Norton*

[18] During the time I wrote this dissertation, Gioia was working on a new book, tentatively titled *99 Poems: New and Selected,* planned for publication by Graywolf Press in 2016. He mentioned the book would include no fewer than twelve new poems. Gioia hesitantly acknowledged that the poems chosen from his four previous volumes might be construed as his own estimation of his best earlier verse. I suspect this upcoming collection of poems, which he was not yet prepared to give me in full, will only reinforce the overall canonical re-appreciation of his verse.

[19] One of the more prominent examples is the 656-page *Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry,* published in 2011 and edited by Rita Dove. If that anthology represents "a fresh look at the canon of twentieth-century American poetry" (40), as a starred review in *Publishers Weekly* insists, then the omission of Gioia's verse constitutes a canonical cuff.

Anthology of English Literature has remained the *sine qua non* of college textbooks, setting the agenda for the study of English literature in this country and beyond. Its editor, therefore, holds one of the most powerful posts in the world of letters, and is symbolically seen as arbiter of the canon" (27), points out Rachel Donadio in her 2006 *New York Times* essay "Keeper of the Canon" about Cornell University Professor Emeritus M. H. (Meyer Howard) "Mike" Abrams, the founding editor of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* in 1962 and its general editor until 2006, the year he was succeeded by Harvard Professor Stephen Greenblatt. "It remains Norton's top-selling anthology, with eight million copies in print," adds Donadio, who admits that it has been "assailed by some for being too canonical" (27). She also states that "*The Norton Anthology of American Literature* has similarly remained more canonical."

Regarding any new edition of a leading poetry anthology, what is added and what is subtracted can have a subtle ripple effect on the canonical stature of a poet. In "Built to Last," a 2012 *New York Times* dialogue between Abrams and Greenblatt about the fiftieth anniversary of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature,* Greenblatt acknowledges especially the peril of removal in "the situation that Mike faced when he revised the anthology—when something comes out of the print pages, it ceases to circulate" (31). Even with today's technological advantage of reading or downloading supplemental anthology material on the Internet, the reaction to such an online posting can be either desirably "extra" or dismissively "extraneous." An unintended, lower status can harden around material that did not make the final editorial cut for inclusion in a print anthology from which poems are habitually assigned and taught in the classroom. As poet and critic

Katha Pollitt bluntly pointed out: To a student, "if it isn't taught, it doesn't count" ("Why We Read: Canon to the Right of Me . . . ," *Reasonable Creatures* 22).

Besides *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, other popular anthologies containing Gioia's verse are *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*[20] ("The Archbishop" and "Summer Storm" from *Interrogations at Noon*), chosen by David Lehman; *Good Poems* ("Summer Storm") and *Good Poems, American Places* ("In Chandler Country" from *Daily Horoscope*), selected by Garrison Keillor; *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry* ("Alley Cat Love Song" from *Interrogations at Noon*),[21] selected by Billy Collins; *The Best American Erotic Poems: From 1800 to the Present* ("Alley Cat Love Song"), edited by David Lehman*; The Making of a Sonnet: A Norton Anthology* ("Sunday Night in Santa Rosa" from *Daily Horoscope*), edited by Edward Hirsch and Eavan Boland; *The Music Lover's Poetry Anthology* ("God Only Knows" and "Lives of the Great Composers" from *Daily Horoscope*), edited by Helen Handley Houghton and Maureen McCarthy Draper; *Don't Tell Mama: The Penguin Book of Italian American Writing* ("Cleared Away," "Money," and "Planting a Sequoia" from *The Gods of Winter*), edited by Regina Barreca; *Wild Dreams: The Best of Italian Americana* ("Planting a Sequoia"),

[20] In his review of this book, which he praises as "a major new version of the American Poetry canon," poet and critic Todd Swift draws a distinction between avant-garde poets (including Charles Bernstein and Lyn Hejinian) and "lucid mainstreamers like Billy Collins and Dana Gioia" ("The American Poetic Tic" 30). Although Swift's juxtaposition of those latter two poets seems eccentric and may carry a whiff of animadversion for both, his citation of Gioia as a poet in the mainstream of contemporary American verse is still a sign of Gioia's canonical readiness.

[21] As of April 3, 2015, the "Poetry 180: A Poem a Day for American High Schools" website, maintained by the U.S. Library of Congress, had previously distributed and still offered Gioia's "Alley Cat Love Song" (poem 087) and "Entrance" (poem 171) from *Interrogations at Noon* and "Thanks for Remembering Us" (poem 048) from *Daily Horoscope* (www.loc.gov/poetry/180).

edited by Carol Bonomo Albright and Joanna Clapps Herman; and *Staying Alive: Real Poems for Unreal Times* ("All Souls'" from *The Gods of Winter*), edited by Neil Astley.[22]

Even in a "Contemporary Poetry" graduate course I took during the summer of 2009 at Drew University, I could have opted to read and write about Gioia's "All Souls'" in the assigned textbook *Staying Alive: Real Poems for Unreal Times*, which "may be the best poetry anthology ever" according to Paul Chowder in Nicholson Baker's novel *The Anthologist* (187). But I focused instead on Stephen Dunn's poem "Happiness" from *Staying Alive*. I do not regret my selection of Dunn's work, which I admire. But like my choice of verse there, the choice of verse for any anthology depends "on whether you are personally willing to stand behind a poem or not" (Baker 45). As Dana Gioia himself admits in his introduction to *California Poetry: From the Gold Rush to the Present,* an anthology he co-edited:

> Has some deserving poet been unjustly—if also unintentionally—omitted from his or her proper place in this book? Undoubtedly. Almost by definition, an anthology is a book that omits one's favorite poem. (And also a volume that canonizes poems one abhors.) Time will surely reveal worthy authors whom we have ignorantly excluded. In the meantime we encourage outraged readers to compile competing anthologies of their own. We welcome all serious rivals. California poetry deserves multiple studies. No one book will ever exhaust the richness of the subject. (xxii)

[22] Though unlikely to enjoy the popularity of the books mentioned here because of its narrower geographic focus, Laurence Goldstein's *Poetry Los Angeles: Reading the Essential Poems of the City* includes Gioia's "The Freeways Considered as Earth Gods" from *Pity the Beautiful* as well as an analysis of the poem. Goldstein also quotes the first two stanzas of Gioia's "Los Angeles after the Rain" from *The Gods of Winter*.

Concurring with Gioia while simultaneously taking a lighthearted swipe at Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence,* Jonathan Lethem in his book *The Ecstasy of Influence* encourages readers to "let a million canons Bloom. Only, canons not by authoritarian fiat but out of urgent personal voyaging. Construct your own and wear it, an exoskeleton of many colors" (124). In his preface to the anthology *Singing School: Learning to Write (and Read) Poetry by Studying with the Masters,* poet and essayist Robert Pinsky essentially echoes the sentiments of both Gioia and Lethem by stating that "this anthology will succeed if it encourages the reader to emulate it by replacing it, or supplementing it" (xii), and that "the best anthology is the one each reader compiles, personally, according to his or her judgment, pleasure, and awe" (xv). Poet Michael McFee likens an individual reader's "mental anthology" to "a literary mixtape or CD, where you say: *here's what excites and moves me, I hope you like it too*" (51).[23]

Gioia's generous allowance for a wide difference of opinion about poetic choices in an anthology and Lethem's, Pinsky's, and McFee's genial rallying cry for readers to assemble their own cannot dampen the shock of Gioia's absence among the hundred poets chosen for *The Open Door: One Hundred Poems, One Hundred Years of Poetry Magazine,* an anthology published in 2012 and compiled by then *Poetry* editor Christian Wiman and then senior editor Don Share, who is now editor. In an interview posted at Chicagomag.com, the website of *Chicago* magazine, Share disclosed that he and Wiman "already had a sense of the poems that we wanted. We knew the greatest hits. . . . In a

[23] Gleefully contrarian, Donald Hall believes he could make "a fine anthology of American poetry from the last three decades which included no poems by poets who had won a Pulitzer Prize or been nominated for a National Book Award or printed in a major anthology or won a Guggenheim or served on an N.E.A. panel or been front-paged by *APR* [*American Poetry Review*]" ("Poetry Notebook," *Poetry and Ambition* 110).

way, to surprise ourselves, and so our readers would be surprised and interested, we had to dispense with some things" (Geoffrey Johnson, www.chicagomag.com, October 3, 2012). Obviously "some things" included Gioia's verse on the supposition that it would neither amply surprise nor amply interest readers of the anthology.

What makes the shutting of *The Open Door* to Gioia so startling is that he has been a contributor to *Poetry* since at least 1982. No fewer than eighteen of his poems have been published in its issues, and eight other Gioia poems as well as several of his translations of poems are on the magazine's website, www.poetryfoundation.org, including "Elegy with Surrealist Proverbs as Refrain" and "The End of the World" from his American Book Award-winning *Interrogations at Noon.* The omission of Gioia's verse in *The Open Door* is even more dumbfounding in light of the announcement by *Poetry* in its November 1985 issue that Gioia had won its Frederick Bock Prize for his three poems in the August issue: "Cruising with the Beach Boys" and "The End," both included in *Daily Horoscope,* and "The Next Poem," included in *The Gods of Winter.* The September 2010 issue of *Poetry* listed Gioia's name first on the front cover and featured three poems—"The Present," "The Angel with the Broken Wing," and "Reunion"—that were later included in his highly praised fourth collection of verse, *Pity the Beautiful*, in 2012. And the May 2011 issue of *Poetry* featured two poems by Gioia, "Pity the Beautiful" and "Special Treatments Ward," both included in *Pity the Beautiful*.

Did every one of those Gioia poems published by *Poetry* in individual issues or made available on its website fail to meet the means test for acceptance into *The Open Door*?[24] This is not a matter of armchair second-guessing about exclusion, which can

[24] Adding to this puzzlement is the fact that *Poetry* magazine packed its October-November 1987, 75th anniversary issue with the verse of select poets it had previously published, along with a "Comment"

quickly descend into whininess. It is a fundamental question about the criteria applied for inclusion, where canonicity can frequently acquire a spark.

In compiling a list of "The Top 200 Advocates for American Poetry (2013)" for *The Huffington Post* on August 13, 2013, poet and essayist Seth Abramson includes Comedy Central TV host Stephen Colbert, actors Bill Murray and James Franco, and singer-songwriters Fiona Apple and Joanna Newsom with established poets and critics Richard Wilbur, Mark Doty, Rita Dove, Stephen Dunn, Louise Glück, W. S. Merwin, Ted Kooser, William Logan, J. D. McClatchy, Robert Pinsky, Harold Bloom, Helen Vendler, Mary Oliver, Kay Ryan, and David Lehman, among others. Abramson even lists 23 more names suggested by readers as worthy of inclusion among the 200, such as Robert Hass, Brenda Shaughnessy, Dan Chiasson, and Laura Kasischke. The list, Abramson insists, "isn't intended to detail who's presently writing the best poetry, but is rather simply a list of who's doing the best to advocate for American poetry by any and all means (including by writing it, but by no means limited to the authorial function)" (www.huffingtonpost.com/seth-abramson). Dana Gioia, as strong an advocate as American poetry has today, is neither on the list of 200 nor among the 23 additional names.

A far less disconcerting but still revelatory omission of Gioia was in *The Best of the Best American Poetry: 25th Anniversary Edition*, another 100-poem volume that was published in 2013 and selected by guest editor Robert Pinsky. Because Gioia's poem "The Litany" in *The Best American Poetry 1997*, guest-edited by James Tate, is the only

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section of writers lauding the magazine. That 75th anniversary issue included Dana Gioia's poem "Night Watch" (pp. 60-61) and his comment (pp. 225-226).

poem of his ever to appear in the series since its inception in 1988, its exclusion may seem unremarkable. But as I will argue in chapter six on Gioia's *Interrogations at Noon* that contains "The Litany," it is indisputably one of his finest poems. So its absence in a book whose title, *The Best of the Best American Poetry: 25th Anniversary Edition,* virtually proclaims poetic pre-eminence over a quarter century cannot be dismissed lightly. With the exception of Tate, twenty-eight established poets and poetry critics[25] serving as guest editors did not select any verse by Gioia for their editions. To his credit, *The Best American Poetry* series editor David Lehman defers to his guest editors to select all the verse for their individual editions. Nevertheless, in "The Businessman, the Statesman, and the Poet," his April 29, 2012, blog entry on Gioia, Lehman gave the following high praise to *Pity the Beautiful,* Gioia's fourth book of verse, which was officially published on May 8, 2012:

> 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.

[25] They are John Ashbery, Donald Hall, Jorie Graham, Mark Strand, Charles Simic, Louise Glück, A. R. Ammons, Richard Howard, Adrienne Rich, Harold Bloom, John Hollander, Robert Bly, Rita Dove, Robert Hass, Robert Creeley, Yusef Komunyakaa, Lyn Hejinian, Paul Muldoon, Billy Collins, Heather McHugh, Charles Wright, David Wagoner, Amy Gerstler, Kevin Young, Mark Doty, Robert Pinsky, Denise Duhamel, and Terrance Hayes. Bloom was guest editor of *The Best of the Best American Poetry 1988-1997.*

(http://blog.bestamericanpoetry.com/the_best_american_poetry/2012/04/the-businessman-the-statesman-and-the-poet.html)[26]

Despite Lehman's encomium for Gioia's most recent poems, poets Denise Duhamel and Terrance Hayes, the guest editors for *The Best American Poetry 2013* and *The Best American Poetry 2014*, chose none of them for their editions. The circumstantial evidence of these exclusions suggests Dana Gioia's poems somehow fell short of the superiority displayed in the 2,125 poems[27] published in twenty-eight *Best American Poetry* editions without his verse.

Gioia himself is a highly successful anthologist whose criteria for selecting verse are literary quality, variety, and—for anthologies intended to be taught—unpatronizing accessibility prompting pleasure, wisdom, consolation, and surprise. As he informed me, Gioia never includes a poem to which he does not respond in some elemental way.

Also, like several anthologists, Gioia is not averse to including his own verse in collections he has helped to compile. A perennially popular choice for college classrooms across America, *An Introduction to Poetry* by X. J. Kennedy[28] and Dana Gioia is now in its thirteenth edition. The 720-page paperback contains Gioia's poem "Money" from *The Gods of Winter* as well as Kennedy's poem "To the Muse" and his English translations of

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[26] Posted at the blog entry by Lehman is this comment by me on April 30, 2012: "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."

[26] The total is the result of multiplying 27 editions by 75 poems each, and then adding the 100 in the 25th anniversary edition. *The Best American Poetry 2015*, with guest editor Sherman Alexie, is scheduled to be published in September 2015 and consequently could not be included in this total or dissertation.

[28] In 2015 Kennedy won the Jackson Poetry Prize from Poets & Writers, a nonprofit literary organization founded in 1970. The prize includes a $50,000 award.

Japanese haikus by Matsuo Basho and Taniguchi Buson. *California Poetry: From the Gold Rush to the Present* is a 408-page paperback edited by Dana Gioia, Chryss Yost, and Jack Hicks that includes Gioia's "California Hills in August" from *Daily Horoscope* and "Planting a Sequoia" from *The Gods of Winter* as well as Yost's verse "Lai with Sounds of Skin" and "Last Night." *Twentieth-Century American Poetry,* a 1,189-page paperback edited by Dana Gioia, David Mason, and Meg Schoerke with D. C. Stone, features Gioia's verse "The Next Poem" and "Planting a Sequoia" from *The Gods of Winter* and Mason's poems "Spooning" and "Song of the Powers." Published as a companion volume to *Twentieth-Century American Poetry, Twentieth-Century American Poetics: Poets on the Art of Poetry* is a 544-page paperback edited by Dana Gioia, David Mason, and Meg Schoerke with D. C. Stone that includes Gioia's essay "Can Poetry Matter?" from his book of criticism bearing the same title.

A polyglot, Gioia is fluent in Latin, German, Italian, and French (with, as he told me, "a little Spanish"), and he invests meticulous care in his English translations of foreign-language verse. In them he seeks a delicate, unstultified balance, importing or re-creating as much as possible the musicality, nuance, inflections, idiomatic grace, formal precision, humor, poignancy, complexity, articulacy, and narrative arc of the original works. Those qualities are evident in his English translation of such extended works as Eugenio Montale's *Mottetti: Poems of Love,* a sequence of twenty Italian motets (short poems) written between 1934 and 1939 and "made into English poems of startling, contained power by Dana Gioia" according to poet and critic Tom Clark (7), and Lucius Annaeus Seneca's Latin tragedy *Hercules Furens,* or *The Madness of Hercules,* found in

Seneca: The Tragedies Volume II, edited by David Slavitt.[29] Similar attention to detail typifies *Poems from Italy,* edited by William Jay Smith and Dana Gioia. It is a 456-page paperback containing Gioia's English translations of Italian verse by Dante Alighieri, Giovan Battista Marino, Mario Luzi, and Eugenio Montale, as well as Smith's English translations of Italian verse by Michelangelo Buonarroti, Ugo Foscolo, Giacomo Leopardi, Giosué Carducci, Giovanni Pascoli, Umberto Saba, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Salvatore Quasimodo, Eugenio Montale, and "Anonymous." *New Italian Poets,* edited by Dana Gioia and Michael Palma, also reveals a heightened linguistic sensibility. In that 385-page paperback are Gioia's English translations of Italian verse by Fabio Doplicher and especially Valerio Magrelli, as well as Palma's English translations of Italian verse by Luigi Fontanella.

While translating foreign-language poems or excerpts from a drama into English, Gioia told me he strives to keep his translations in harmony with the original works' tone and style. It is the reason why he appends to the end of select translated poems such phrases as "(After Seneca)," "(After Rilke)," and "(After the Italian of Valerio Magrelli)," which can be further construed as "taking after," that is, recapturing or re-expressing in one language as far as possible the unique confluence of meanings, images, and cadences used by the original author in another.

[29] "Descent to the Underworld (Seneca)," Gioia's poetic translation in *Interrogations at Noon*, is identical to what appears in Act III of *The Madness of Hercules*, but "Juno Plots Her Revenge (Seneca)," another poetic translation in *Interrogations at Noon*, reveals some modifications and especially several deletions in comparison to the corresponding passage in Act I of *The Madness of Hercules*. These changes may reflect Gioia's desire to create a more compact verse for *Interrogations at Noon*, where it is still the longest poem at six pages, and to ensure that the excerpt would stand on its own as a poem outside of its dramatic context, all of which would require his editing.

But as Gioia reminded me, "after" almost always implies a free translation, namely, a translation radiating a new, flexible spirit that nevertheless remains true to the core of the original poem. In that way, his translation avoids the pitfall of literalism so that "a good poem shall not be turned into a bad one," as Dante Gabriel Rossetti warned in his preface to *The Early Italian Poets*. "The only true motive for putting poetry into a fresh language must be to endow a fresh nation, as far as possible, with one more possession of beauty" (65). As Gioia himself elaborated in an interview for *World Literature Today*:

> Poetry is an international art. If you know only the poetry of your own country (or your own era), you know very little about the art. Translation is also the most intense and complete way of understanding a poem. You have to assimilate and re-create the totality of the original. Of course, you always fail to bring over everything, but the process of translation forges a deep connection that changes your sensibility as decisively as a trip to a foreign country would. To enter the imagination of a great poet is potentially to find, in Yeats's words, "the singing masters of the soul." (30)

Even though, by his own admission, "there is no way of doing a poetic translation that will please everyone" ("Introduction," *The Madness of Hercules* 45), Gioia's translations mostly accomplish his expectations for them. And that makes his absence all the more baffling in *The Art of Empathy: Celebrating Literature in Translation,* an 88-page anthology published in August 2014 by the National Endowment for the Arts. During his 2003-2009 tenure as chairman of the NEA, Gioia was, by wide consensus, one

of its most effective and visionary leaders in its nearly half-century of existence. Before accepting the NEA chairmanship, however, he was already a respected English translator of Italian, Latin, and German literature, and after leaving the federal agency he continued to enhance his reputation in translation.

In *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008*, a 316-page book published by the NEA in 2008, the federal agency under Dana Gioia's leadership in fiscal year 2005 separated "the review process for fellowships in translation from those in creative writing in order to highlight the importance of translation as its own art form" (194). About that policy shift, Gioia explained that "the American arts are most vibrant when they include the best works of art from other nations. . . . Through our commitment to funding translation, the NEA has been an essential catalyst for bringing the world's literature to our country" (194). Under his guidance the NEA helped to fund the wholly bilingual editions *Contemporary Russian Poetry: An Anthology*, published by Dalkey Archive Press in 2008, and *Líneas Conectadas: Nueva Poesía de los Estados Unidos* and *Connecting Lines: New Poetry from Mexico*, both published by Sarabande Books in 2006, as well as *The New North: Contemporary Poetry from Northern Ireland*, published by Wake Forest University Press in 2008 that comprises poems in their original English and poems in Irish, or Gaelic, that appear with their English translations. Gioia is generously thanked in each of those anthologies, and for *Líneas Conectadas* he wrote a preface in English that appears with a translation into Spanish by José Emilio Pacheco.

How could Dana Gioia, who has clear-cut credentials as a literary translator and as an ardent supporter of literary translation in and out of NEA auspices, not merit even a fleeting footnote, let alone full inclusion, in an NEA book devoted to literary translation?

It seems beyond any alibi of institutional amnesia. After all, fewer than six years have elapsed since Gioia left the NEA. Obviously his odd omission from this book by the federal agency he once headed will not further his canonical consideration in poetic translation or his public advocacy of it.

In *Why Translation Matters* Edith Grossman, a renowned translator of Spanish literature, described the task for translators this way:

> We endeavor to hear the first version of the work as profoundly and completely as possible, struggling to discover the linguistic charge, the structural rhythms, the subtle implications, the complexities of meaning and suggestion in vocabulary and phrasing, and the ambient, cultural inferences and conclusions these tonalities allow us to extrapolate. (8-9)

But Grossman adds an admonition: "What never should be forgotten or overlooked is the obvious fact that what we read in a translation is the translator's writing" (31). Gioia's "(After Rilke)" and similar phrases acknowledge the pertinence of Grossman's point. Yet even she concedes that it is probably "unrealistic to wish that every reviewer of a translated work were at least bilingual" (32).

Does that mean a reviewer or scholar with no more than a halting grasp of the non-English language of an original poem cannot fully appreciate either the original or the translation? Grossman believes, at heart, that a translation should "be judged and evaluated on its own terms" (31-32). In her review of Wisława Szymborska's *Poems New and Collected 1957-1997*, translated from the Polish by Stanislaw Barańczak[30] and Clare

[30] Also a poet, essayist, and Harvard lecturer, Stanislaw Barańczak died at his home in Newton, Massachusetts, on December 26, 2014, from pneumonia resulting from Parkinson's disease. He was 68 years old.

Cavanagh, and Tomas Tranströmer's *New Collected Poems*, translated from the Swedish by Robin Fulton, even a scholar and critic as prominent as Helen Vendler makes a stark admission:

> I have written on these poets before, always aware how much better a Polish or Swedish critic could describe their originality. Relying on translation, one has to trust the translator. . . . I am grateful to Barańczak, Cavanagh, and Fulton (as well as other translators) for bringing me the work of these poets. ("Staring through the Stitches," *The New York Review of Books,* October 8, 1998, www.nybooks.com)

Vendler's recognition of those translators would surely have pleased Grossman.[31] No less salient is essayist Ellen Willis's appreciation of the art: "In a communications crisis, the true prophets are the translators" (20).

In the poetry anthologies overseen by Gioia, an exception to the inclusion of his own verse or verse translated into English by him is *100 Great Poets of the English Language.* This 592-page paperback, edited by Gioia with Dan Stone, runs chronologically from the unknown poet responsible for *Beowulf*, presumably written between the eighth and eleventh centuries, to Kay Ryan, born in 1945. The reason for Gioia's omission of his own verse, he informed me, is to prevent any whiff of presumption or overweening overreach in fulfilling the titular intention of this anthology. Audaciously placing himself in the august company of Shakespeare, Donne, Milton,

[31] Though I took two years of Latin in high school, five years of Spanish throughout high school and my freshman year at college, a graduate course in the French novel half-taught in French, and a written Spanish translation examination required for my M.A. in English, I have not heavily relied on my past study of these languages to evaluate Gioia's translations from them into English. Taking my cue from Grossman and Vendler, I have chosen instead to evaluate Gioia's translations on their own terms as poems.

Pope, Blake, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Shelley, Keats, Dickinson, Yeats, Frost, Stevens, Eliot, Auden, Heaney, and his other choices for *100 Great Poets of the English Language* is simply not in Gioia's nature or character.[32]

But Gioia's admirable resistance to insinuating himself in that anthology by no means diminishes the quality of his own verse deserving canonical consideration. Nor should the lack of long-term literary perspective on Gioia's poetry—*Daily Horoscope,* his first book of verse, was published just twenty-eight years ago—deter any critical judgments about its potential for perpetuity. As Robert Frost asserted:

> It is absurd to think that the only way to tell if a poem is lasting is to wait and see if it lasts. The right reader of a good poem can tell the moment it strikes him that he has taken an immortal wound—that he will never get over it. That is to say, permanence in poetry as in love is perceived instantly. It hasn't to await the test of time. The proof of a poem is not that we have never forgotten it, but that we knew at sight that we never could forget it. ("The Poetry of Amy Lowell," *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays* 712)

Nevertheless, Gioia's profile as a poet is still often eclipsed by his profile as a literary critic or former NEA chairman. His sole citations in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics,* published in 1993, and *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, published in 2012, are, in fact, as a literary critic and/or NEA

[32] Other poetry anthologies co-edited by Gioia are arguably justifiable homes for his own verse because he is not yoking the adjective "great" to himself or his poems in those anthologies and because his own verse, at minimum, exemplifies the virtuosity, vitality, and variety of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century American poetry.

chairman. In those successive editions of a reference book widely deemed the most authoritative and comprehensive on the subject of verse, Gioia *prima facie* made no reputational headway as a poet.[33]

So when poet David J. Rothman in the July 8, 2012, issue of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* begins his commendatory review of Gioia's *Pity the Beautiful* with a rhetorical question, "Is there anyone in the poetry world who does not know or at least know of Dana Gioia?," a reflexive reply from some readers might be "yes" if Rothman is excluding Gioia's literary criticism and NEA chairmanship from consideration (H16). As Micah Mattix re-emphasized at the outset of his favorable review of *Pity the Beautiful* in the October 2012 issue of the journal *First Things*: "Dana Gioia is one of those poets known more for his criticism and service than his poetry" (www.firstthings.com). In the June 17, 2007, commencement address he gave at Stanford University, his alma mater, Gioia himself acknowledged that "a few students were especially concerned that I lacked celebrity status. It seemed I wasn't famous enough. I couldn't agree more. As I have often told my wife and children, 'I'm simply not famous enough'" (news.stanford.edu).[34] Even if Gioia enjoys neither celebrity nor fame, as he claimed, his poetry minimally merits equal critical footing with his other accomplishments.

Of course, celebrity and fame, or the lack thereof, should never be the driving criteria for the canonical estimation of a poet. Fashion is ephemeral, and in literature the

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[33] See p. 835 for sole citation of Gioia, as literary critic, in "NEW FORMALISM" in the 1,383-page third edition and pp. 315, 326, 937, and 1018 for citations of Gioia, as either literary critic or NEA chairman, in "COWBOY POETRY," "CULTURAL STUDIES AND POETRY," "NEW FORMALISM," and "PERFORMANCE" in the 1,639-page fourth edition.

[34] A condensed version of Gioia's commencement address at Stanford appeared under the title "The Impoverishment of American Culture" in the July 19, 2007, issue of *The Wall Street Journal* (online.wsj.com).

momentous should always trump the momentary. An example of the latter is Rod McKuen, one of whose best-selling volumes of verse during the 1960s was fatuously entitled *Listen to the Warm*. He enjoyed indisputable celebrity and fame then, yet his mawkish or overearnest verse engenders almost reflexive derision from most literary critics today.[35]

The imbalance in recognition for Gioia the poet, however, has not prevented him from receiving several accolades and awards for his verse. Besides the Frederick Bock Prize he won in 1985, Gioia shared the Poets' Prize in 1992 with Adrienne Rich: he for *The Gods of Winter*, and she for *An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991*. In 1991, the year of its publication, *The Gods of Winter* was also chosen as a main selection of the Poetry Book Society in England. Additionally in 1992, Gioia and co-editor and fellow translator Michael Palma shared the American Literary Translators Association's Distinguished Book Award for *New Italian Poets*, a bilingual anthology featuring twelve other translators commissioned by Gioia to translate—for the first time into English—the verse of ten contemporary Italian poets: Maria Luisa Spaziani, Rossana Ombres, Rodolfo Di Biasio, Fabio Doplicher, Umberto Piersanti, Luigi Fontanella, Patrizia Cavalli, Paolo Ruffilli, Milo De Angelis, and Valerio Magrelli.[36] In 2005 Gioia received the John Ciardi Award for Lifetime Achievement in Poetry.

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[35] In an interview in the spring 1986 issue of *The Paris Review*, Pulitzer Prize winner and former U.S. Poet Laureate Karl Shapiro (1913-2000) made a remark typifying that scorn: "I was very upset when I saw that Random House—my publisher—was publishing Rod McKuen too. I had been invited to talk at the American Library Association, and I used that as an example of the degeneration of publishing poetry" (www.theparisreview.org). Also, in a chapter entitled "Recognizing Excellence" in *An Introduction to Poetry*, co-edited by X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia, McKuen's poem "Thoughts on Capital Punishment" was used as an instance of sentimentality (309-311).

[36] One of the translators picked by Gioia for this anthology, published by Story Line Press in 1991, is Jonathan Galassi, who translated two poems by Magrelli, with Gioia himself translating the other seventeen. Galassi also contributed "Two Jackals on a Leash," his translation of an essay in 1950 by Nobel

Perhaps the pinnacle prize for Gioia's verse came in 2014 when *The Sewanee Review* at The University of the South chose him for the Aiken Taylor Award in Modern American Poetry, "honoring a distinguished American poet for the work of a career" (www.sewanee.edu, 21 May 2014). If the company a poet keeps is any reflection of his deserving stature within the canon, then the heady company of such previous Aiken Taylor Award winners as W. S. Merwin, Gwendolyn Brooks, Anthony Hecht, Wendell Berry, Maxine Kumin, Donald Hall, Louise Glück, and Richard Wilbur collectively suggests Gioia belongs with them in the canon.

Other critical or increasingly popular validations of his verse include at least twenty-four poems (with seven featured more than once) on Garrison Keillor's radio program *The Writer's Almanac*, broadcast on XM Satellite Radio and on nearly 400 public radio stations reaching more than 2.5 million listeners; twenty-two poems in the "world's poetry archive" at www.poemhunter.com; five poems—one of which, "Long Distance," appeared in two versions separated by twenty-six years of compositional gestation—at www.poemoftheweek.org, an anthology of contemporary American verse that was founded in 2006 by managing editor and poet Andrew McFadyen-Ketchum; three poems in "Poem of the Week" at www.potw.org, a poetry anthology founded in 1996 that is completely different from the prior online anthology; and poems spotlighted

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Prize-winning Italian poet Eugenio Montale (1896-1981), to Gioia's translation of Montale's *Mottetti*, published by Graywolf Press in 1990. Four years earlier, I interviewed Galassi for "Poet's Corner," an article I wrote on Montale for the June 1986 issue of *Attenzione* magazine (Vol. 8, No. 4, pages 42-44). Reprinted in my article were two poems—each in the original Italian, accompanied by Galassi's English translation—from Montale's first book of verse, *Ossi di seppia* (in English, *Cuttlefish Bones*). A poet and currently the president and publisher of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Galassi has translated Montale's verse and essays since 1974. My prior comments about Gioia's English translation of Montale's *Mottetti* can be found earlier in this chapter. Gioia and Galassi have something else in common: each separately had Elizabeth Bishop as a teacher at Harvard.

in the Academy of American Poets' "Poem-a-Day" series at www.poets.org and in Ted Kooser's "American Life in Poetry" series at www.americanlifeinpoetry.org, providing a free weekly column for newspapers and online publications across the country.

Moreover, Gioia's six original poems ("California Hills in August," "The Garden of the Campagna," "Speech from a Novella," "In Chandler Country," "Equations of the Light," and "All Souls'"), a poem translated from Romanian into English (Nina Cassian's "Orchestra"), and an essay ("Studying with Miss Bishop") published between 1982 and 1990 in *The New Yorker* place his writing in a rare air of appreciation. Howard Moss,[37] who was *The New Yorker*'s first full-time poetry editor from 1950 until his death on September 16, 1987, accepted all of Gioia's poems for the magazine. Alice Quinn, who succeeded Moss as *The New Yorker*'s poetry editor and held that post until 2007, solicited the Cassian translation from Gioia. And William Shawn, *The New Yorker*'s editor from 1952 to 1987, was informed by Moss that Gioia was working on an essay about Bishop and asked him for it. Moss, Quinn, and Shawn were among the most influential editors in the history of *The New Yorker,* which, "since its beginning in 1925, was never like any other magazine" (12), asserts Ben Yagoda in *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made*. Besides its very popular and witty cartoons, *The New*

[37] Gioia has written no fewer than three essays about Moss: "The Complicated Legacy of Howard Moss" for the November/December 1987 issue of the *AWP (Association of Writers & Writing Programs) Newsletter*, "The Difficult Case of Howard Moss" for the winter 1987 issue of *The Antioch Review*, and "The Difficult Case of Howard Moss," combining and revising those two previous essays for *Can Poetry Matter?* in 1992. Also, in the *Twentieth-Century American Literature* anthology co-edited by Gioia, he wrote the introduction for the entry on Moss that features this statement: "Under his discriminating leadership it [*The New Yorker*] became the most important showcase for new poetry in America" (687). In Nicholson Baker's novel *The Anthologist,* Moss reaps a compliment for his poetry from Paul Chowder, the narrator: "Moss was in his lovely self-effacing way a genius. You could hear notes of Wallace Stevens in him, and sometimes Bishop, and sometimes even Auden, but he was able to give it his own sad, affectionate jostle" (42).

Yorker set a very high professional standard for well-written, well-vetted news and cultural reportage, reviews and criticism, personal essays, fiction, other humor, and, most assuredly, verse. Even now, getting published in *The New Yorker* carries a literary imprimatur of excellence that no other so-called mass-class periodical in America can match.

Complementing those verse credits are the non-verse plaudits conferred on Gioia's *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture,* chosen both as a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist in criticism and as one of *Publishers Weekly*'s "50 Best Books" for 1992. In addition, *The Ceremony & Other Stories* by Weldon Kees, which Gioia edited and for which he wrote an introduction, was chosen by *The New York Times* as one of its "Notable Books of the Year" for 1984.

In a White House ceremony on November 12, 2008, Dana Gioia received the Presidential Citizens Medal, the United States's second-highest civilian honor, for his pivotal role in promoting, fortifying, and celebrating the arts nationwide. Past Presidential Citizens Medal honorees giving commendable service to the country include Teach for America founder Wendy Sue Kopp, U.S. Congress Librarian James H. Billington, East Los Angeles high-school calculus teacher Jaime Escalante, and *New York Times* columnist Anthony Lewis.

On May 16, 2010, Gioia received the University of Notre Dame's Laetare Medal, established in 1883 and awarded annually to a U.S. Catholic "whose genius has ennobled the arts and sciences, illustrated the ideals of the Church, and enriched the heritage of community" (Michael Garvey, *Notre Dame News,* March 14, 2010). Previous Laetare

Medal recipients include U.S. President John F. Kennedy, Catholic Worker Movement leader Dorothy Day, tenor John McCormack, and novelist Walker Percy.

The impression left by all those accolades and awards is buttressed by Dana Gioia's writing for such newspapers as *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and *The Boston Globe*; for *San Francisco Magazine*, where he was the classical music critic from 1997 to 2002; and for such other publications as *The Harvard Review*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Southern Review*, *The American Scholar*, *Hungry Mind Review*, *First Things*, *The Hudson Review* (for which he was a contributing editor from 1988 to 2003), *Italian Americana* (for which he was poetry editor from 1994 to 2003), *The Dark Horse* (for which he was U.S. editor from 1995 to 2003), and *Translation* (for which he was a contributing editor from 1986 to 1994).

Not yet collected into a large book or miscellany by Gioia are a substantial number of his essays, articles, and reviews in those publications and others. They include two lengthy, arguably watershed critical essays, "Robert Frost and the Modern Narrative" from *The Virginia Quarterly Review* and "The Catholic Writer Today"[38] from *First Things*, as well as the autobiographical "Learning from Robert Fitzgerald" and "Meeting Mr. Cheever" from *The Hudson Review*, "How Nice to Meet You, Mr. Dickey" from *The American Scholar*, and "'Lonely Impulse of Delight': One Reader's Childhood" from *The Southern Review*.[39] Another essay of both literary and historical significance is "The

[38] Published as a shorter, 10-page essay in the December 2013 issue of *First Things*, the full text of this essay was published in 2014 by Milwaukee's Wiseblood Books in a 36-page trade paperback edition of 2,000 copies.

[39] This essay by Gioia in the winter 2007 issue of *The Southern Review* was made into a book bearing the same title (minus the quotation marks around the first four words plucked from Yeats's poem "An Irish

Unknown Soldier: The Poetry of John Allan Wyeth," whom Gioia describes as "the missing figure in the American literature of World War I—a soldier poet still worth reading. Little known in his lifetime, he has been utterly forgotten by posterity" (*The Hudson Review*, summer 2008 issue, 253). That essay became Gioia's introduction to the first re-publication, by The University of South Carolina Press in 2008, of Wyeth's *This Man's Army: A War in Fifty-Odd Sonnets* since its initial trade edition published by Longmans, Green & Company in 1929 that followed the original, small edition published the previous year by Harold Vinal, Ltd.

By any rubric, the sheer quantity of Gioia's quality in diverse writing is staggering.

Adding sheen to Gioia's canonical status in American letters are his honorary doctorates (through 2014) from Seton Hall University, Lehigh University, Gettysburg College, University of the Pacific, Beloit College, West Chester University, Catholic University of America, St. Andrews University, Saint Anselm College, Chapman University, and Dominican School of Philosophy & Theology, plus an honorary MFA from the American Conservatory Theater. In 1992 Gioia started to contribute commentaries for BBC Radio on such poets as Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In 1995, with now retired West Chester University Professor Michael Peich, Gioia founded the West Chester University Poetry Conference on Form and Narrative,[40] one of the largest and most prestigious all-poetry conferences in

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Airman Foresees His Death") in spring 2007 by Artichoke Press in Mountain View, California. See chapter two in this dissertation for a more detailed description of the book.

[40] The WCU Poetry Conference on Form and Narrative was "in hiatus for 2015 but is scheduled to resume in June of 2016," according to WCU's Poetry Center website (www.wcupa.edu/_academics/sch_cas/ poetry).

America today, and in 2001 he also founded Teaching Poetry, a conference at Sonoma Country Day School in Santa Rosa, California, for high-school instructors of English to develop new ways to strengthen the interest of their students in verse. In 2007 *Tony Caruso's Final Broadcast,* a ten-scene opera by composer Paul Salerni with a libretto by Gioia from 2004, won the National Opera Association chamber opera competition. And in 2010 the opera, recorded during the previous year by tenor Eric Fennell with several other soloists and the Monocacy Chamber Orchestra, was issued by Naxos Records as a compact disc, with Gioia's libretto printed in full in the insert booklet.

Gioia's musical collaborations, in fact, are extensive. They include a libretto, published by Graywolf Press in 2001, for composer Alva Henderson's two-act opera *Nosferatu,* based on the classic German silent horror film by F. W. Murnau in 1922 and released in a double-CD package by Albany Records in 2005, and a libretto based on a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm for composer Lori Laitman's one-act children's opera, *The Three Feathers,* which premiered at Virginia Tech University's Anne and Ellen Fife Theatre during the weekend of October 17-19, 2014.

Laitman and Salerni have each additionally set several Gioia poems as songs or in song cycles. The latter include Laitman's *Becoming a Redwood, The Apple Orchard, Being Happy,* and *Equations of the Light* (all performed on the album *Becoming a Redwood: Songs of Lori Laitman*, Albany Records, 2006), and Salerni's *Speaking of Love* in 1993, *Requia* in 1997, and *Bad Pets* in 2007. And in 2004 Henderson composed *Winter Requiem,* a symphonic choral work relying on Gioia's poems "Veterans' Cemetery," "Prayer," "Song for the End of Time," "Pentecost," "The Gods of Winter," "Unsaid," "Planting a Sequoia," "Rebirth," and "New Year's."

Among the other composers who have supplied musical settings for Gioia's verse are jazz pianist Dave Brubeck, Latin jazz and classical musician Paquito D'Rivera, art-song specialist Ned Rorem, and University of Southern California's Thornton School of Music Distinguished Professor of Composition Morten Lauridsen, to whom Gioia dedicates his latest book of poetry, *Pity the Beautiful*.[41]

In his *Wall Street Journal* profile on Lauridsen entitled "The Best Composer You've Never Heard Of," Terry Teachout praised him especially for his choral work: "All he does is compose radiantly beautiful music" (online.wsj.com, January 20, 2012). On September 27, 2011, in the University of Southern California's Bovard Auditorium, Lauridsen and baritone Rod Gilfry, an associate professor of vocal arts in USC's Thornton School of Music and a two-time Grammy Awards nominee, joined Gioia for "An Evening of Poetry and Music" to celebrate Gioia's USC appointment that year as Judge Widney Professor of Poetry and Public Culture. On January 27, 2014, at Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa, Lauridsen recorded his musical setting of Gioia's poem "Prayer" from *The Gods of Winter* with the Wartburg College Choir, conducted by Lee

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[41] Alliances between poets and musicians can take many forms and, in fact, date back centuries. During their public readings in the 1950s, the poets known as the Beats frequently featured jazz or other music, and that inclination persists in the twenty-first century among other poets. They include Thomas Sayers Ellis, who in 2014 was featured on two tracks of jazz saxophonist James Brandon Lewis's album *Divine Travels*; Robert Pinsky, who in 2012 released the album *POEMJAZZ* with pianist Laurence Hobgood; Rhina P. Espaillat and Alfred Nicol, who in 2009 released the album *Melopoeia* with guitarist John Tavano; and Seamus Heaney, who in 2003 released the album *The Poet & the Piper* with uilleann pipes and whistle player Liam O'Flynn. Performers who have recorded musical settings of poetry are as diverse as soprano Dawn Upshaw with jazz composer Maria Schneider in 2013 on *Winter Morning Walks* (using the verse of Ted Kooser and Carlos Drummond de Andrade, the latter translated into English by poet Mark Strand), Irish folksinger Susan McKeown in 2010 on *Singing in the Dark* (using the verse of Paul Muldoon, Theodore Roethke, Anne Sexton, Hayden Carruth, and others), the Fred Hersch Ensemble led by jazz pianist and composer Fred Hersch and featuring jazz singers Kate McGarry and Kurt Elling in 2005 on *Leaves of Grass* (using the verse of Walt Whitman), and pop vocalist Natalie Merchant in 2010 on *Leave Your Sleep* (using the verse of Christina Rossetti, Gerard Manley Hopkins, e. e. cummings, Charles Causley, and others). For Merchant's album, Dana Gioia helped her track down a few permissions and obtain a photo of Causley for use inside. See "Verse That Sings in Many Styles," my article in the June 17, 2010, issue of *The Wall Street Journal*, for more about that recording.

Nelson and accompanied by Lauridsen himself on piano.[42] On March 16, 2014, in a sold-out concert devoted exclusively to Lauridsen's music at Los Angeles's Walt Disney Concert Hall, his "Prayer" was performed by the Los Angeles Master Chorale, conducted by Grant Gershon and preceded on stage by Gioia's recitation of the poem. In the 2012 documentary *Shining Night: A Portrait of Morten Lauridsen*, Gioia refers to him as "one of the few living composers whom I would call great." In the 2014 YouTube video of the Wartburg College Choir's performance of "Prayer," Lauridsen refers to Gioia as "a national treasure."

Gioia's public recitations of his verse surrounded or complemented by live music are not unusual. As he explained in an interview for *World Literature Today*:

> There is nothing sacred about the format of the poetry reading. I believe in mixing the arts. I especially love to combine poetry and music. An audience will hear poems better if they have just been listening to music. They listen less analytically but with greater emotional and intuitive openness. I have done poetry readings with both [drummer] Chico Hamilton's and [pianist] Helen Sung's jazz ensembles.[43] I have also read with numerous classical groups. If I give a reading at a school with a good vocal department, I often plan a short recital of songs based on my poems midway through my performance. (34)

[42] A video of that performance can be accessed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1xr-aWsQEA. By March 19, 2015, it had logged 43,505 "hits," an encouraging response to a contemporary work performed by the chorus of a small, rural, liberal arts college.

[43] In July 2014 Gioia informed me that he was working with composer Helen Sung on a jazz song cycle.

A more familial indication of Gioia's fondness for combining verse and music on stage came in 1989 when his brother Ted Gioia,[44] almost seven years younger than Dana and a fine jazz pianist, participated in "An Evening of Jazz and Poetry" with Dana in New York City. This event featured Dana's recitation of "Counting the Children," a four-part, 166-line poem first published in the summer 1990 issue of *The Hudson Review* and then in *The Gods of Winter* in 1991. For "An Evening of Jazz and Poetry" Ted composed and performed instrumental interludes between the recited parts of his brother's poem, and in 1990 he included "A Moment for Michael Jasper," a melody growing out of those interludes, on *Tango Cool,* an album recorded with jazz alto saxophonist Mark Lewis.

In his lecture "The Inner Exile of Dana Gioia,"[45] delivered on the campus of The University of the South on February 18, 2014, as part of the festivities surrounding Gioia's Aiken Taylor Award in Modern American Poetry, poet and scholar David Mason echoed the opinion of Micah Mattix and myself in remarking that "Dana Gioia is more famous as a critic and public servant than as a poet" (142)[46] Perhaps some hard-line

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[44] Dana and Ted Gioia, who was born on October 21, 1957, have another brother and a sister: Gregory, born on May 25, 1970, and Cara, born on July 1, 1971. A deejay and party planner, Greg was graduated with a bachelor's degree from the University of California, Berkeley. A captain in the United States Navy Reserve, Cara has a B.A., M.A., and M.B.A. from Stanford and an M.A. from the Navy Supply Corps School, and she spent a year at the U.S. Naval War College. Cara currently works at the Pentagon. All four Gioia siblings were born in Los Angeles.

[45] Mason turned this lecture into an essay of the same title that was published in *The Sewanee Review,* Vol. CXXIII, No. 1, winter 2015, 133-146. All related quotes come from *The Sewanee Review* essay.

[46] Another example of Gioia's public service was his chairmanship of then-Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's Poet Laureate Task Force, created to select candidates for L.A.'s first-ever poet laureate in 2012. Receiving this inaugural honor was Eloise Klein Healy, whose verse was described by Gioia as "smart, funny, and human" (Morrison, December 7, 2012, www.articles.latimes.com). Gioia also was a voting member on the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee of the U.S. Postal Service from 2009 to 2013. The CSAC is responsible for sifting through up to 50,000 suggestions submitted annually for subjects to appear on U.S. stamps and postal stationery. In 2012 the CSAC helped gain approval for a group of U.S. Postal Service commemorative stamps entitled "Twentieth-Century Poets" honoring Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Theodore Roethke, Sylvia Plath, Denise Levertov, Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, e. e. cummings, Joseph Brodsky, and Elizabeth Bishop.

traditionalists on college faculties regard Gioia's sundry scholarly passions and avid cultural pursuits as the symptoms of a dilettante or someone who simply cannot make up his mind about a specialty on which to concentrate. Undeterred, Gioia stubbornly clings to his "outsider status, feeling no pressure to conform to academic criteria. He could write whatever he wanted, not what might have been required for tenure," declared Mason.

A true polymath,[47] Gioia belies the cliché "jack of all trades and master of none." His proven expertise in a wide range of genres and fields (poetry, fiction, drama, translation, opera and other music, journalism, radio commentary, multi-lingualism, pedagogy, public arts administration and advocacy, et cetera), along with the strong opinions he has frequently voiced about them, has alternately attracted and alienated different cohorts inside and outside the mainstream. He is unpredictable because he has a redoubtably independent mind, forged in childhood, shaped by subsequent schooling (whether formal or autodidactic), and governed by an inner compass whose true north is aesthetic excellence.

[47] This term can be taken literally in light of Gioia's involvement in the Sidney Harman Academy for Polymathic Study at the University of Southern California, where he is Judge Widney Professor of Poetry and Public Culture who teaches only in the fall semester and "without having to attend faculty meetings," somewhat enviously notes Colorado College Professor of English David Mason ("The Inner Exile of Dana Gioia" 133).

Chapter 2

FEAR THE INADEQUATE LIFE

"The impeded stream is the one that sings." – Wendell Berry

Enormous joy permeated the September 29, 2004, event where I first met Dana Gioia. I had been invited by the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts to attend the award ceremonies in Washington, D.C., for that year's recipients of the National Heritage Fellowships, the highest annual honor bestowed by the federal government on traditional and folk artists. Among the honorees was Randolph, Massachusetts, resident Joe Derrane, arguably the greatest U.S.-born button accordionist in the history of Irish traditional music. In the fall of 1993, I persuaded Derrane to perform in public again after a 35-year hiatus on the button accordion, and on May 29, 1994, following months of intense practice, he made a spectacular comeback at the eighteenth annual Irish Folk Festival in Wolf Trap Farm Park for the Performing Arts in Vienna, Virginia. During the intervening decade Derrane burnished his reputation with five acclaimed new recordings,[48] several new compositions,[49] a host of TV and radio appearances, numerous concerts, tours, and festival performances, and at least two documentary films,[50] all earning him a 2004 NEA National Heritage Fellowship.

[48] In the interest of disclosure: Derrane's *Give Us Another* in 1995, *Return to Inis Mór* in 1996, *The Tie That Binds* in 1998, and *The Boston Edge* in 2004 all featured my liner-note essays. Since his comeback in 1994, Derrane has released a total of seven new albums, including *Grove Lane* in 2010, for which I also wrote a liner-note essay.

[49] Again in the interest of disclosure: One of those new compositions is the reel "Hitchner's Phoenix" on his 1995 album, *Give Us Another.* Nearly twenty years later, I am still stunned by Derrane's gesture.

[50] Once more in the interest of disclosure: I appear in one of those film documentaries, *As Played by Joe Derrane,* produced by Frank Ferrel in 1995.

At the September 29 banquet ceremony in the Great Hall of the Thomas Jefferson Building in the U.S. Library of Congress, I thanked Dana Gioia, who officially became NEA chairman in February 2003, for arranging such a memorable evening for the NHF recipients. Hobbled by a foot injury, he used a cane to circulate genially and generously among the honorees and their families and friends. Gioia and I conversed about Irish traditional music,[51] Stephen Sondheim, and poetry, especially the verse of Eugenio Montale. I mentioned my article about Montale in *Attenzione* magazine, and he mentioned his translation of Montale's *Mottetti*. Gioia and I also discussed another common interest: freelance writing. Shared experience had forged our first connection.

What I did not tell Dana Gioia at the banquet ceremony or at the next morning's awards conferral ceremony in the Cannon House Office Building Caucus Room was that I was far more aware of his younger brother Ted,[52] a distinguished jazz critic, than him. I also omitted from my chats with Dana Gioia that I had never read a poem by him. His verse appeared in some anthologies assigned for university graduate courses I had taken, but none of his poems was expressly part of the syllabi or became a topic for classroom discussions and term papers. Even at the National Heritage Fellowships ceremonies in 2004, I had a hunch I was not alone in my ignorance of his verse.

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[51] In a December 9, 2004, letter thanking me for an *Irish Echo* newspaper article I had written on the NHF events in Washington, D.C., Gioia provided a postscript: "Have you heard of Martin Hayes, the exceptional fiddler? He is worth checking out." That made me smile because I had previously written about the County Clare-born fiddler on several occasions unknown to Gioia. What impressed me is how astute Gioia was about Hayes's "exceptional" Irish traditional fiddling skill as soon as he encountered it.

[52] Still occupying a place of prominence in my home music library is a well-thumbed copy of Ted Gioia's *The History of Jazz*, a book published in 1997 and selected as one of *The New York Times*'s "Notable Books of the Year" for 1998. In the book's acknowledgments Ted thanks his brother Dana for his "invaluable feedback" (427). Also, Ted Gioia dedicates his 2012 book, *The Jazz Standards,* "for my siblings: Dana, Greg, and Cara" (v). That, too, is well situated in my library.

Motivated by those NHF encounters, I did some biographical digging on Dana Gioia. Some of what I found then and since is introduced here on the premise that

> knowledge of the author's life experiences can aid in the understanding of his or her work. While biographical information can sometimes complicate one's interpretation of a work, and some formalist critics (such as the New Critics) disparage the use of the author's biography as a tool for textual interpretation, learning about the life of the author can often enrich a reader's appreciation for that author's work. (Michael Meyer 746)

In *An Introduction to Poetry*, co-editors Gioia and Kennedy essentially agree with Meyer: "A shrewd biographical critic always remembers to base an interpretation on what is in the text itself; biographical data should amplify the meaning of the text" (553). In an admiring essay on poet Donald Justice (1925-2004),[53] critic and poet Adam Kirsch noted that "it was not the poet who endured, but the poem, as he [Justice] wrote in 'Poem': 'Even while you sit there, unmovable, / You have begun to vanish. And it does not matter. / The poem will go on without you'" (*The Modern Element* 148-49). And in Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* Geoffrey Braithwaite, the narrator-doctor maniacally chasing minuscule details about the author who wrote *Madame Bovary* (1857) and "A Simple Life" (1877), poses some stern questions: "Why does the writing make us chase the writer? Why can't we leave well alone? Why aren't the books enough? Flaubert

[53] Dana Gioia has done fuller justice to Justice over many years and publications, especially in his essay "Tradition and an Individual Talent," "An Interview with Donald Justice," and his review "A Poet's Poet," all found in *Certain Solitudes: On the Poetry of Donald Justice*, the 1997 book Gioia co-edited with William Logan.

wanted them to be: few writers believed more in the objectivity of the written text and the insignificance of the writer's personality; yet still we disobediently pursue" (12).

Those questions have not faded with time. In Stephen Burt's review of two volumes of verse, Erika Meitner's *Ideal Cities* and John Beer's *The Waste Land and Other Poems,* in the January/February 2011 issue of *Boston Review,* this subtitle appeared: "Does Autobiography Make Good Poetry?" (www.bostonreview.net). And a "Bookends" exchange between Adam Kirsch and novelist Thomas Mallon in *The New York Times Book Review* of June 24, 2014, was entitled "When We Read Fiction, How Relevant Is the Author's Biography?" (31). Kirsch ends his commentary with this thoughtful observation: Biographical information about an author should "clarify the factors that shape the work—to show how life and work were both shaped by the same set of problems and drives. Otherwise, we simply reduce writers to celebrities or acquaintances; and don't we have more than enough of both?" (31).

My dissertation harbors no aspiration to be a critical biography of Dana Gioia, nor should it be regarded as one. That is a project for another scholar. What interests me is how biographical information, as Kirsch suggests, can shed a brighter light on, and bring more circumstantial insight into, Gioia's work. Substituting biography for exegesis is an easy path to take but by no means the most fruitful. The same is true for treating poetry as autobiographical raiment, something to be doffed to discover the hidden "truth" of an author's life. The truth of poetry and the truth of a poet's life are not mirror reflections of each other, but the latter can help readers "see" the poetry better contextually. Equally applicable is this statement by *The New Yorker* critic Alex Ross: "Art does not stand apart from reality; if it did, it would have no life in it, no light, no darkness, no power"

("As If Music Could Do No Harm," www.newyorker.com, August 20, 2014). But in the end it is the work that matters most to any consideration of canonicity. Against the backdrop of biography and reality offered in this chapter, Gioia's work and my examination of it will hopefully emerge sharper and fuller in later chapters.

To begin Gioia's life with the beginning of his life:[54] he was born on December 24, 1950, at California Lutheran Hospital in Los Angeles. Five years later he and his parents moved to a large rear apartment in a stucco triplex beside another stucco apartment triplex in Hawthorne, a working-class city twelve miles southwest of Los Angeles. Gioia's family and their relatives occupied five of the six apartments in those triplexes in Hawthorne, perhaps best known as the spawning ground of the Beach Boys and the setting for Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* in 1984 and *Jackie Brown* in 1987. They are "two films that capture the ineffable charm of my hometown," quipped Gioia, eliciting chuckles from graduates of Stanford University, his alma mater, in the commencement address he gave there on June 17, 2007 (news.stanford.edu).

Michael Gioia, Dana's Detroit-born father, was of Sicilian descent who held jobs as a taxi driver, chauffeur, department store clerk, shoe-store proprietor, and real-estate agent. Dorothy Ortiz Gioia, Dana's mother, was a native Californian of mainly Mexican but also Native American descent who had a job as a telephone operator.[55] The household budget was tight, and both of them worked hard, often putting in twelve-hour days six days a week in jobs that did not overlap in schedule. "I spent a great deal of time alone in

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[54] Despite J. D. Salinger's famously crude jab at "all that David Copperfield kind of crap" (1) in *The Catcher in the Rye*, I decided to paraphrase Charles Dickens's "To begin my life with the beginning of my life," no less a famous phrase, from *David Copperfield* (1).

[55] Michael Gioia was born on November 1, 1917, and died on October 30, 2001. He was 83 years old. Dorothy Ortiz Gioia was born on February 9, 1929, and died on November 23, 2005. She was 76 years old.

our apartment or sat awake with one of my parents while the other was at work" (44), wrote Dana in his essay "'Lonely Impulse of Delight': One Reader's Childhood," by far the most comprehensive and authoritative account of his years growing up in Hawthorne.

Neither parent was formally well educated or especially bookish. In fact, "I don't recall ever seeing any adult relation, except my mother, read a book" ("'Lonely Impulse'" 45), Dana admitted, although his mother additionally read periodicals (Pulliam, "Modern Man of Letters," www.worldmag.com, October 4, 2008). Her recitations from memory of popular verse by Rudyard Kipling ("Gunga Din"), John Greenleaf Whittier ("Maud Muller" and "Barbara Frietchie"), Ogden Nash ("Tale of Custard the Dragon"), Edgar Allan Poe ("Annabel Lee"), and other poets helped to develop Dana's appreciation for literature and, in particular, verse. "It is important to remember that my mother was a working-class Mexican-American woman born in poverty," he said. "Despite what the professors would have us believe, average Americans once loved poetry" (qtd. in Ross, "A Conversation with Dana Gioia," *Image* 67). Gioia "grew up with poetry as one of life's ordinary pleasures. I began memorizing poems that I liked at an early age" (qtd. in *Poetry Daily,* May 30, 2010). As noted in a *Fast Company* magazine article on Gioia in December 2007, he "spontaneously recited Robert Frost's 'Nothing Gold Can Stay'"[56] and "estimates he has memorized 'a couple hundred poems'" (Sittenfeld, "Poet-in-Chief," www.fastcompany.com). Such bounty was not a boast.

[56] This eight-line, iambic trimeter poem by Frost is obviously one of Gioia's favorites, and he wrote an untitled critique of it on pages 208-210 of *Poetry for Students: Presenting Analysis, Context and Criticism on Commonly Studied Poetry,* Volume 3, published in 1998. That critique also appears under the title "On Robert Frost's 'Nothing Gold Can Stay'" on Gioia's website, www.danagioia.net/essays.

Proudly referring to himself as "one-hundred-percent non-Anglo" (Haven, "Dana Gioia Goes to Washington" 14), Gioia was raised Catholic "in an extended family of immigrants, by people who spoke Sicilian in a Mexican neighborhood" (Gioia, "A Poet in the Supermarket" 17). His neighborhood was a hardscrabble melting pot of races and ethnicities, "populated mostly by Mexicans and Dust Bowl Okies" (Gioia, "On Being a California Poet," *Disappearing Ink* 158).

Even before his formal education began at St. Joseph's, a Catholic elementary school operated by the Sisters of Providence in Hawthorne, Gioia had discovered the transportive power of reading. Perhaps no poet encapsulated that power more succinctly and skillfully than Emily Dickinson in this verse:[57]

> There is no Frigate like a Book
>
> To take us Lands away
>
> Nor any Coursers like a Page
>
> Of prancing Poetry -
>
> This Traverse may the poorest take
>
> Without oppress of Toll -
>
> How frugal is the Chariot
>
> That bears the Human Soul - (501)

[57] From *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition,* edited by R. W. Franklin and published in 1999, this popular poem also appeared in different form (two quatrains with punctuation, alternating line indentation, and no internal capital letters) on page 364 of the first Pocket Cardinal paperback edition (issued in 1958) of *A Concise Treasury of Great Poems: English and American,* which I avidly read in elementary school. Louis Untermeyer chose and edited the verse for this paperback, and my own worn, torn, and taped copy is still a prize possession of mine—not as a nostalgic artifact from my childhood, but as a volume I continue to peruse for pleasure.

Gioia first encountered her poetry through Aaron Copland's song cycle *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*,[58] but he had not read her verse in earnest until his twenties. Even so, the gist of the poem would not have been lost on Gioia as a budding bibliophile poring over the large, eclectic, personal library of a maternal uncle, Ted Ortiz, who was in the Merchant Marine and often away at sea. With obvious relish Gioia recalled that his uncle's

> books and records filled our apartment. They were our only décor. No other kids in our neighborhood grew up with a den wall made up entirely of musical scores by Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Haydn, and Mozart. Or had a living room lined with the works of Thomas Mann and George Bernard Shaw, not to mention Cervantes, Dante, and Pushkin in the original languages. (There was also a huge garage cabinet full of classical LPs.) My environment was quite literally intellectual. . . . I grew up taking for granted that a poor kid could love and learn about the great works of the human imagination. (qtd. in Olson, "The Arts—Agents of Change and Source of Enchantment," October 15, 2013, www.catholicworld report.com)

Ted Ortiz amassed his magnificent library while he was a ship's crewman visiting exotic ports and foreign countries. On November 15, 1955, when Dana had not yet turned five years old, his uncle died tragically at age 28 in a plane crash over Stockton harbor after the Cessna in which he was a passenger hit high-voltage power lines and plummeted into the water below ("Plane Dives into Ship Channel," *Oakland Tribune*, November 15,

[58] The poem beginning "There is no Frigate like a Book" is not among the dozen set to music by Copland in this 1950 work, his longest for solo voice.

1955, www.newspaperarchive.com/oakland-tribune/1955-11-15). Dana described him as "an old-style proletarian intellectual" who "lived with my parents when he was not at sea" ("'Lonely Impulse'" 45). Dana's affection and admiration emerge clearly here:

> My uncle must have been a remarkable man. Although raised in brutal poverty, he had supported himself at sea from the age of fifteen while also learning five languages and schooling himself in music, literature, and art. I don't honestly remember him—only stories about him and a few photographs. If I claimed to love him, I would really be saying that I loved the books and records he left behind. I'm not sure that distinction matters much. I think I know him pretty well. After all, he did help raise me. ("'Lonely Impulse'" 50)

Dana's younger brother Ted, born almost two years after the death of his uncle, was named after him. The influence of Uncle Ted was just as indelible on his namesake:

> I have no childhood recollections of his presence the way Dana does. But I clearly benefited from the things he left behind—books, recordings and (most important for me) an upright piano he kept in our family home. . . . I definitely felt, often subliminally but sometimes consciously, that I should try to lead the kind of life he might have led had he not died at such a young age. (qtd. in Olson, "The Arts—Agents of Change and Source of Enchantment," October 15, 2013, www.catholicworldreport.com)

The example set by Ted Ortiz of intellectual curiosity and omnivorous erudition, despite economic impediments that might have easily thwarted someone less driven to learn, profoundly shaped both Gioia brothers' sense of themselves and what was possible

for their futures. Ted Ortiz's devotedly self-compiled library proved that the reverse of Dickinson's opening phrase was literally true for Dana and Ted: there would not have been a cornucopia of literature and music in the Gioia apartment without his frigate or, more accurately, freighter to take him lands away and to return with such reading and listening riches. Dana Gioia's own perspective on the practice, place, and pleasure of poetry in society was launched by the literary legacy of his seafaring uncle Ted.

"I had a happy, lonely childhood," Dana Gioia summed up, adding that "I have always been an insomniac. Even as a young boy, I had trouble falling asleep. My parents, both night owls, let their children keep late hours. Once we were in bed, they never forced us to turn off the lights—one of their countless kindnesses" ("'Lonely Impulse'" 44, 48). When I asked what caused his susceptibility to sleeplessness then and now, Gioia said he always had trouble turning off his mind. His poem "Insomnia," first published in the fall-winter 1982-83 issue of *The Ontario Review* and included three years later in *Daily Horoscope*, adroitly describes what the mind and ear cannot elude in "the unbroken dark" (18).

As he stated in "'Lonely Impulse,'" Gioia had encountered Michelangelo, Titian, Botticelli, El Greco, and Velasquez before he ever encountered Dr. Seuss in books (46). Such precocity, however, never dampened his ardor for books of daring and danger that appealed to many boys his age. Gioia bought a paperback copy of Edgar Rice Burroughs's *At the Earth's Core* for forty cents at a neighborhood drugstore near the end of fourth grade at St. Joseph's elementary school, and, excited by that novel, he plowed through forty-four more by Burroughs over the next few years. "I remember those books as fondly as I do my first kiss," Gioia noted. "Years later I read at least a dozen of them

aloud to my sons at bedtime. They loved them as much as I did" (qtd. in Koss, "A Conversation with Dana Gioia" 72). During fourth grade at St. Joseph's, which had a library "about the size of a large walk-in closet," Gioia also read unabridged editions of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. "No one told me the novels were too hard for a ten year old," he plainly pointed out in "'Lonely Impulse'" (47).

While at St. Joseph's, Gioia also pursued another keen interest, music. As he recalled:

> If you are poor, music is the only art in which you can get serious instruction. I was lucky enough to have Sister Camille Cecile. . . . For a few dollars a month she gave me two weekly lessons—one in piano, the other in theory. She also arranged to take us to the only classical concerts I ever heard until I got a driver's license. By high school I wanted to be a composer. (qtd. in Olson, "The Arts—Agents of Change and Source of Enchantment," October 15, 2013, www.catholicworldreport.com)

That high school, Junipero Serra, was run by Society of Mary (Marianist) priests and brothers, "many of whom were Hawaiian, Chinese, or Mexican," along with some lay teachers. This all-boys Catholic high school "was located in Gardena, which then contained the largest Japanese population in America—a city in which Buddhist temples outnumbered mainstream Protestant churches" (Gioia, "On Being a California Poet" 158). At Junipero Serra, Gioia expanded his musical instrument learning to include saxophone and clarinet. He also was punished with suspension or expulsion on three occasions for infractions that stem from challenging or disrespecting authority—a

disposition, Gioia told me, that he still has today. Nevertheless, he flourished academically at Junipero Serra, where he became valedictorian for the class of 1969, and he won a partial scholarship to Stanford University, where in the fall he became the first in his family to attend college.

During his freshman year on Stanford's picturesque campus of 8,180 contiguous acres in the San Francisco Peninsula, Gioia admitted that, as "a working-class kid from Los Angeles, I had felt lonely and out of place. . . . I had never lived anywhere that wasn't grim and ugly. This demi-Eden left me feeling breathlessly lost and unworthy" (Gioia, "A Californian in Vienna," www.danagioia.net/essays). He planned to study musical composition at Stanford but eventually switched his major to English with a minor in German, a language he studied intently during his freshman year and used during his sophomore year in Vienna at "Stanford in Austria," part of the university's overseas studies program. There, at age nineteen, he discovered what became a lifelong passion for opera and, through reading imported books of modern poetry and filling "small notebooks with my own awful verses," found his "life's work. I would be a poet" (Gioia, "A Californian in Vienna," www.danagioia.net/essays). Or, as he concisely told an interviewer: "Poetry chose me" (qtd. in Koss, "A Conversation with Dana Gioia" 66).

In 1973, after four years of stellar undergraduate work that included a two-year stint as editor of *Sequoia,* Stanford's literary magazine, Gioia earned a B.A. (English Honors)[59] and won a full fellowship to Harvard, where his academic concentration was comparative literature. Among his teachers were two poets, Robert Fitzgerald (1910-85)

[59] Dana's brother Ted also attended Stanford, also became editor of *Sequoia*, and, in 1979, also was graduated with a B.A. (English Honors). He then attended Trinity College at Oxford University, where he earned an M.A. in philosophy, politics, and economics with first class honors in 1981.

and Elizabeth Bishop, each of whom was appointed as a U.S. Library of Congress consultant in poetry, or what is now designated as poet laureate consultant in poetry. Bishop served in 1949, and illness prevented Fitzgerald from serving in 1984.[60]

Gioia's graduate courses at Harvard included two with Fitzgerald in the fall of 1974: "English 283: The History of English Versification" and "Comparative Literature 201: Studies in Narrative Poetry." In "Learning from Robert Fitzgerald," an essay in the spring 1998 issue of *The Hudson Review*, Gioia refers to him as "my favorite teacher at Harvard" (79) and credits Fitzgerald with strengthening his prosodic and story-oriented verse skills. "My comprehension was undisciplined, incomplete, and approximate," Gioia admitted. "Fitzgerald's rigorous but congenial approach was exactly what I needed" (93).

The graduate course Gioia took with Elizabeth Bishop was "English 285: Studies in Modern Poetry" during the spring semester of 1975. As he described in his essay "Studying with Miss Bishop," first published on September 15, 1986, in *The New Yorker*, many Harvard students were unimpressed by her. She "rarely attracted more than a dozen unenthusiastic undergraduates" (90) to her classes, and in English 285, "by the second class, the dozen original students had dwindled down to five—four undergraduates and me" (92). Nevertheless, Gioia realized that Bishop wanted her students "to see poems, not ideas. . . . Showing us how to experience it [poetry] clearly, intensely, and, above all, directly was the substance of her teaching" (101).

[60] On January 16, 1985, Fitzgerald died from that long illness. He was 74 years old. When Gioia studied with him at Harvard, Fitzgerald was Boylston Professor of Rhetoric, a chair he held from 1965 to 1981.

In "The Example of Elizabeth Bishop," initially published in the November 1987 issue of *Verse* and revised for *Can Poetry Matter?* in 1992, Gioia expanded on what Bishop, a poet repelled by pretension, meant to his generation of poets:

> Some writers affect one deeply not because of their style or subjects but because of their character. Young writers . . . need to develop a character strong enough to withstand both failure and success. For some of us coming to maturity in the late sixties and early seventies, Bishop's personal example deeply influenced our sense of what it meant to be a serious poet. (*Can Poetry Matter?* 215)

In his essay "Elizabeth Bishop: From Coterie to Canon," Gioia examined what scholar Thomas Travisano dubbed "the Elizabeth Bishop phenomenon" (Travisano 903). Gioia explained how, "after Emily Dickinson, she is probably the most widely taught woman poet in the English language" ("From Coterie to Canon" 19). He amplified that claim in his *Wall Street Journal* review of three separate books collecting Bishop's verse, prose, and *New Yorker* magazine correspondence: "An independent and honest writer who never chased fashion, joined groups or struck public poses, she labored at the art's perennial task—to communicate the joy, sorrow and wonder of being human" ("Wherever Home May Be" C6).

Before enrolling in Bishop's course for the spring semester of 1975, Gioia already knew it would be his last term at Harvard.[61] In Gary Fountain and Peter Brazeau's *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography,* Gioia explained his reasons for

[61] Among Gioia's other Harvard instructors was Northrop Frye, whose "brilliant course on myth and poetry had an enduring impact on my understanding of both literature and the Christian mythos" (qtd. in Koss, "A Conversation with Dana Gioia" 76).

leaving: “I began to doubt whether becoming a professor of literature was the best career for doing what I really wanted—to write poetry. My interest in literary theory, my fascination with scholarship, and my own unhealthy delight in playing with critical ideas were all creeping into my writing in bad ways” (296). Though he departed without a doctorate after completing all the coursework for it, Gioia did receive an M.A. in comparative literature from Harvard. As he noted in Fountain and Brazeau’s *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop,* “Fitzgerald and Bishop were the only two teachers who openly approved” (299) of his decision to forsake academia for business by entering the M.B.A. program on a partial scholarship at his alma mater, Stanford University, in the fall of 1975.

That decision was not mysterious. It was practical. “My parents never gave me the independent income I so richly deserved,” Gioia jocularly explained (Lehman, “Room for Rhyme in the Jell-O Mold” 86). “I had to make a living,” he said matter-of-factly (Olson, www.catholicworldreport.com). Gioia’s goal was to have a steady day job and salary that would allow him to write in his free time in his own way at his own pace, without the publish-or-perish pressure so common in academia. “I’m the only person who ever went to business school to be a poet,” he pointed out (Gioia, “A Poet in the Supermarket,” October 28, 2007, www.nytimes.com).

During his February 16, 2005, visit with pupils at Jesuit High School in New Orleans, Gioia admitted that “no one in the history of Stanford Business School did less work than I did” (“Poet Dana Gioia Wows Students with Talk of Literature, Culture, Life,” *Jaynotes* 14). Nevertheless, in addition to his M.B.A. courses, he did find time to be the poetry editor of *Sequoia* and to enroll in a decidedly non-M.B.A. graduate poetry

writing seminar taught by Donald Davie, whom Gioia called "not only one of England's greatest living poets" but "also its most brilliant and independent-minded literary critic" (Gioia, "Donald Davie," *Sequoia,* winter 1978, 16). Gioia has written about Davie at least three times: his essay "Donald Davie" and his "Interview with Donald Davie" appeared back to back in the winter 1978 issue of *Sequoia,* and appearing in the summer 1979 issue of *The Southern Review* was Gioia's review "A Personal Tour of Donald Davie's Imaginary Museum" that reappeared as "Donald Davie's Imaginary Museum" in Gioia's book *Barrier of a Common Language: An American Looks at Contemporary British Poetry* in 2003.

During the summer after Gioia received his M.B.A. from Stanford,[62] he used what savings he had to travel to Italy, where he stayed first in Merano and then headed down to Rome. There, in an inexpensive pension, he read and wrote, finishing drafts for his translations of Eugenio Montale's *Mottetti,* which he had started in 1977 at Stanford and would revise later.

After his summer in Italy, Gioia returned to the United States with about twenty dollars in his pocket. He spent a month in General Foods sales training in Los Angeles, and then, in the fall of 1977, he began as assistant product manager for General Foods in White Plains, New York. Three years later Gioia married Los Angeles-born Mary Hiecke, whom he met in Stanford's bookstore while both were in the M.B.A. program, from which she also was graduated in 1977.

[62] In 1983 Dana's brother Ted also received an M.B.A. from Stanford University, where he taught jazz history and performance from 1986 to 1990. To say that Dana and Ted Gioia excelled academically would be an understatement. The career of each brother is distinguished by writing, music, business, and teaching.

During his 15-year tenure (1977-1992) at General Foods, Gioia received eight promotions: associate product manager, product manager, senior product manager, group product manager, a prominent post in mergers and acquisitions, category manager, marketing manager, and finally vice president of marketing. A notable success for him at General Foods was a "campaign for Kool-Aid—the Marvel comic-book adventures of 'Kool-Aid Man'—designed to reinforce the drink mix's identification with red-blooded American childhood" (Lehman, "Room for Rhyme in a Jell-O Mold" 86). In General Foods USA's dessert division, valued in 1990 at $400 million according to Lehman ("Room for Rhyme" 86), Gioia had perhaps his greatest corporate triumph: the resuscitation of a well-known but flagging brand, Jell-O, through a clever marketing campaign for Jell-O Jigglers, in which the variously flavored and colored, gelatin dessert was "reconfigured as finger food, home craft exercise, and a toy" with the help of comedian Bill Cosby in very popular TV commercials and print ads. "I could absolutely think like an eleven-year-old kid, and then step back and do the shares and volumes," Gioia recalled, adding that Jell-O "went from decline to double-digit growth" (qtd. in Kennicott 22). He also "made his literary bent felt through Jell-O's Reading Rocket, an award-winning child-literacy program aimed at fourth graders" (Lehman, "Room for Rhyme" 87).

All the books of adventure, mystery, fantasy, and science fiction that Gioia voraciously read as a child in multi-cultural, working-class Hawthorne laid the groundwork for his imaginative marketing skills and consumer empathy at General Foods. His corporate superior, Gregory Murphy, praised Gioia for his "renaissance" work on Kool-Aid and Jell-O and described him this way: "There are lots of people who have a

good idea a minute. That wasn't Dana. When Dana had an idea, it was a big idea, a creative idea, a powerful idea" (qtd. in Kennicott 22).

But Gioia also led a double life, harking back to a duality he felt as a child in Hawthorne: "Every reader has two lives—one public, the other secret. . . . Our inner lives are as rich and real as our outer lives, even if they remain mostly unknowable to others" (Gioia, "'Lonely Impulse of Delight'" 44). Fueling his inner or secret life as a child were books, "intimate companions" that "confide something of the wonder, joy, terror, and mystery of being alive" ("'Lonely Impulse of Delight'" 44). Gioia's parents instinctively understood the intrinsic value of his early autodidacticism, but he jealously guarded that covert life from schoolmates and other friends who might disapprove and apply peer pressure to abandon it. He would repeat this pattern when he simultaneously conducted a "public life" as a manager and executive working "an average of ten hours a day at General Foods" (Bawer, "The Poet in the Gray Flannel Suit" 112) and a "secret life" as a writer during morning and evening train commutes as well as for two or three hours per weeknight and customarily throughout much of the weekends at home in Westchester County, New York.

Another pattern retained from Gioia's childhood was his affection for books as physical items worthy of aesthetic respect, especially in their design. Whether in mint or moth-eaten condition, favorite books for a child can become not only the means to imagined worlds but also talismanic *objets d'art*, the touch and sight of which can trigger the memory of a euphoric reading. It may explain why Gioia's "'Lonely Impulse of Delight': One Reader's Childhood" underwent a transformation from a seven-page journal essay in 2005 to the 24-page *Lonely Impulse of Delight: One Reader's Childhood,*

a striking beautiful, hand-bound, letterpress book of just 50 numbered copies made in 2007 by Artichoke Press with a suede-lined slipcase, design ornaments by calligrapher Ward Dunham, and two etchings in color by artist Kay Bradner. Those etchings appear on a double-spread title page showing Gioia's childhood Hawthorne where a single room is lit in an otherwise dark apartment building under a night sky festooned with figures from his relentless reading, and an end-page showing a boy reading by lamplight in a chair as his younger brother rests beside him.

In his afterword for Michael Peich's *Dana Gioia and Fine Press Printing: A Bibliographical Checklist*, Gioia credits the publication of his poetry during the 1980s in select magazines and fine press editions as nurturing and even liberating, allowing his verse to find a readership without excessive bottom-line demands. "However small the readership for each fine press book was, I understood its audience's devotion to the quality and importance of the printed word," he explained in his afterword. "Fine press books gave me the opportunity to address such discriminating readers under ideal conditions" (20).

So it came as no surprise when Gioia published his first full-length verse collection, *Daily Horoscope*, in 1986 with Graywolf Press, founded a dozen years earlier as a letterpress publisher of limited-edition poetry chapbooks in Port Townsend, Washington. Graywolf relocated in 1984 to Saint Paul and later to Minneapolis, Minnesota, where it remains a prominent nonprofit literary publisher in the United States. To date, Graywolf has issued these books by Gioia: *Mottetti*; *Nosferatu*, his opera libretto in 2001; two of his three collections of literary criticism: *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture* in 1992, which contains his bold, controversial essay "Can

Poetry Matter?" from the May 1991 issue of *The Atlantic* magazine, and *Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture* in 2004; and three other full-length volumes of his verse: *The Gods of Winter* in 1991, *Interrogations at Noon* in 2001, and *Pity the Beautiful* in 2012.

After I first met Gioia in 2004 in Washington, D.C., my excavation of his oeuvre has provided me with many delights, insights, and surprises. One in particular stunned me: During the time he was employed by General Foods, he revised several of his translations in *Mottetti,* composed most of the poems in *Daily Horoscope* and all of the poems in *The Gods of Winter,* and wrote or revised all the essays in *Can Poetry Matter?* In that same period he was also the literary editor of *Inquiry* magazine from 1977 to 1979 and then its poetry editor from 1979 to 1983, and in 1988 he became a contributing editor at *The Hudson Review*. To my further amazement, this demanding, bifurcated life hampered neither his corporate nor his literary productivity. If he was burning the candle at both ends, he still managed to keep both ends brightly lit for as long as he worked at General Foods.

In his essay "Business and Poetry," initially published in the spring 1983 issue of *The Hudson Review* and later collected in *Can Poetry Matter?,* Gioia argues persuasively about the advantages of similar double lives for such poets as Wallace Stevens (insurance), T. S. Eliot (banking), James Dickey (advertising), David Ignatow (printing), and A.R. Ammons (sales). Gioia describes his own experience as a covert poet working in business in "A Spy in the House of Commerce" and "Being Outted," two essays not included in his books. (See "Essays" at his website, www.danagioia.net.) The latter essay, written for the publication *Witness* in 1996, is a humorous recounting of his failed effort

to hide from his boss the 516-page, December 1984 "Golden Collector's Issue" of *Esquire* magazine listing (on page 134) Gioia among the honorees in "The Esquire 1984 Register" of "The Best of the New Generation: Men and Women Under Forty Who Are Changing America." Concluding Gioia's "Being Outted" essay is this exchange between him and Gregory Murphy, his cigar-smoking boss, who frequently called subordinates by their initials:

> "D.G., someone told me you wrote poetry."
>
> "Yeah, Greg," I replied. "I do."
>
> He took the greasy stub out of his mouth, ground it into the ashtray, and whispered, not unkindly, only one word, "Shit."
>
> (www.danagioia.net/essays)

Even though "*Esquire* permanently blew my cover" at General Foods, as Gioia acknowledged in "Being Outted," that disclosure would dissolve in importance beside the loss of his first son, Michael Jasper Gioia, from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome[63] at four months of age on December 18, 1987. Dana Gioia's poignant eulogy for his son on Sunday, December 20, 1987, at the North Yonkers Community Church in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York, where he and his family resided, was turned into a beautiful, private, hand-printed, fine-press edition from Aralia Press founder and friend Michael Peich "as a gift of love to Mary and Dana Gioia in memory of their son, Michael Jasper" (*A*

[63] Sometimes called crib death, "Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) is defined as the sudden death of an infant less than one year of age that cannot be explained," according to Atlanta's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which reports that SIDS accounts for about half of the 4,000 infant deaths with no obvious cause each year (www.cdc. gov./sids). The National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Md., adds that "most SIDS deaths occur when babies are between two months and four months old" (www.nlm.nih. gov).

Remembrance: Michael Jasper Gioia). Dana gave me a copy of the unnumbered, 14-page booklet that was never meant for distribution or sale.

In his eulogy he acknowledged the paradoxical futility and necessity of trying to convey what he and Mary were feeling: "I am a person for whom words have always been important, perhaps too important, and even in this terrible situation where words seem powerless not only to alleviate but even describe our grief, I selfishly want to gain some small solace by speaking plainly and directly about our loss." Dana described the lessons his four-month-old son gave his parents as his lasting legacy: "humility before life," "to savor the great joy of being alive," "that we were part of a larger loving human community," and "how deeply we could love and were loved." At the end of his eulogy Gioia offered these immeasurably moving words in direct address to Michael Jasper: "Dear son, you've lived the only perfect life your mother and I have ever seen. Thank you for giving every moment of it to us. You never brought us any sorrow except in leaving."

Business associates at General Foods USA and members of the Hastings-on-Hudson Public Library established the Michael Jasper Gioia Collection of Children's Books as a memorial to Dana and Mary's son at the library. In a pamphlet donated by General Foods USA that describes the collection, its aim "is to gather all of the children's books published by Hastings authors and artists. These books will be permanently displayed in a special non-circulating collection, available both for individual children and formal school reading programs. The collection has been funded in perpetuity to buy future children's books of local authors and artists" (16). Among the authors profiled in the pamphlet are Charlotte Zolotow, Ed Young, and James Howe.

In an interview published a quarter century after Michael Jasper Gioia's death, Dana was asked if his son's sudden and still unfathomable passing had provoked a "crisis of faith" in him. The devoutly Catholic Gioia replied:

> No, his death simply deadened me. For several years I felt as if I existed behind a thick glass wall beyond which the rest of the world went on obliviously. I eventually discovered how many other people lived in this isolated, joyless world. I met them everywhere. I had joined a secret society no one wants to enter. . . . I was broken, and only with immense pain and long suffering did I heal. I then discovered that I had become a different person—humbler, kinder, and more patient. Only then was I open to grace. (Koss 68)

After Michael's death, Gioia stopped writing poetry. The drought lasted almost a year. When he resumed, the poems he composed and published in such magazines and journals as *The New Yorker, The Paris Review, Poetry,* and *The Hudson Review* would largely form his next volume of verse, *The Gods of Winter*, carrying this dedication: "In Memory of My Son / Michael Jasper Gioia / Briefest of joys, our life together."

Far less important personally but important vocationally to Gioia was another metamorphic event occurring outside the General Foods workplace: the publication of his essay "Can Poetry Matter?" in the May 1991 issue of *The Atlantic* magazine. As Ned Balbo declared, "For many poetry readers, and much of the public, Dana Gioia sprung full blown into prominence with the publication of his now-famous essay" ("The Two Dana Gioias" 227). In fact, "Can Poetry Matter?" sparked a battle royal in what became known as the poetry wars of the 1990s.

The opening two sentences of "Can Poetry Matter?" set the tone for the entire essay: "American poetry now belongs to a subculture. No longer part of the mainstream of artistic and intellectual life, it has become the specialized occupation of a relatively small and isolated group" (94). Gioia defines the group as poets who work in academia and academics who teach poetry. This inbred insularity, he argues, breaks the once strong covenant between poets and common readers. "Like subsidized farming that grows food no one wants, a poetry industry has been created to serve the interests of the producers and not the consumers," he writes. "And in the process the integrity of the art has been betrayed" (100). By gradually displacing a public readership for poetry with a much narrower readership of poets themselves, the latter have widened the cultural moat between them and the public. According to Gioia, this isolation is self-inflicted.

Such strong opinions provoked equally strong reactions, pro and con. In her monograph *Dana Gioia,* published in 2003, April Lindner summarizes part of the reaction:

> Articles attacking and defending "Can Poetry Matter?" were published in a wide range of journals, including the *Times Literary Supplement*, *The New Criterion, USA Today,* and *Washington Post Book World*. Gioia's article was the subject of special interviews on the BBC, the Canadian Broadcasting Company, Public Television, and National Public Radio. Gioia's critique stirred up controversy in literary circles and marked him as a key figure on the literary scene. (8)

Matthew Brennan affirms that "the hotly contested essay made Gioia something of a household name" (2) in his monograph *Dana Gioia: A Critical Introduction,* published in 2012.

In his "Introduction to Tenth-Anniversary Edition" for *Can Poetry Matter?,* the 1992 book enabled by, titled after, and containing his *Atlantic* essay, Gioia pointed out that "no one expected the huge response that 'Can Poetry Matter?' generated, especially not its author. Although no one believes me, I did not set out to create a controversy" (xi). Perhaps Gioia is being just a little disingenuous there, since his essay's blunt title poses a rhetorical question virtually courting controversy and a predictable flood of commendations and condemnations from poetry's factions. In his "Introduction to Tenth-Anniversary Edition" Gioia also admits that the magazine's "editors warned me to expect angry letters from interested parties. When the hate mail arrived typed on the letterheads of university writing programs, no one was surprised" (xi).

Still, the volume of responses *was* a surprise as the essay "generated more mail than any article the *Atlantic* had published in decades" (xi). In "Hearing from Poetry's Audience," published in the spring 1992 issue of Britain's *Poetry Review* and revised afterward for *The Atlantic Online,* Gioia quantified the amount of mail elicited by his "Can Poetry Matter?" essay: "Eventually I received over 400 letters from *Atlantic* readers" (www.theatlantic.com). That number broke down into about 200 pieces of mail sent to *The Atlantic* and about 200 sent directly to Gioia, according to David Streitfeld's "Book Report" in the September 15, 1991, issue of *The Washington Post.* Streitfeld also subdivided that mail into three categories: "About 10 percent of the responses were denunciations from poets who taught creative writing. Another 10 percent said, 'Of

course no one reads modern poetry, because it's a bunch of junk that no one can understand.' The rest of the mail, Gioia says, was supportive" (www.washingtonpost.com). With justified pride Gioia could point to his essay as the primary catalyst for why "poetry had suddenly proved worth arguing about" ("Introduction to Tenth-Anniversary Edition," *Can Poetry Matter?* xiii).

The controversy and the arguments it spawned came in waves and quickly spilled outside the confines of *The Atlantic* magazine. In the *Washington Post* poet Anthony Hecht responded tartly: "This article is clearly intended to be militantly provocative, to excite strong feelings and to sell itself to the editors of the *Atlantic Monthly* [sic], who undoubtedly like things that prove controversial. But it's garbage. To talk about how 'the integrity of the art has been betrayed'—it's dumb" (qtd. in Streitfeld). Poet Donald Hall was blunter: "Dana Gioia's full of shit" (qtd. in Haven, "Dana Gioia Goes to Washington" 16). For a well-known poet like Hall to engage in profanity indicates how strongly Gioia roiled the once placid waters of contemporary American verse.

The *casus belli* of Gioia's "Can Poetry Matter?" in literary circles, however, had unintended and unwanted consequences for his own verse. Reactions to his essay underscored how his "highly visible polemics . . . often distract attention away from his own significant poetry" (Maio 63). Cynthia Haven was more direct, declaring that "Gioia paid a price: literary journals had widely reviewed his first book of poems, *Daily Horoscope* (1986), but they virtually ignored his second, *The Gods of Winter* (1991)" ("Poet Provocateur" 72). Gioia himself admitted as much, though he staunchly defended his polymathy:

> Without question the fame of this essay—which was international—overshadowed my reputation as a poet for nearly a decade. I was suddenly seen as poetry's most iconoclastic critic, "the guardian of standards," as the *New York Times* once called me. Contemporary literary life is so specialized that a writer is expected to do only one thing well. This is a very recent prejudice that originated with the academization of literary life. . . . I have always seen myself working in the tradition of the poet-critic, which has been important to American letters—from Edgar Allan Poe to T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Kenneth Rexroth, Louise Bogan, and Randall Jarrell. (Johnson 30-31)[64]

Other consequences of the essay proved positive and motivating for Gioia. "Its reception demonstrated wide interest in Gioia's literary ideas" (Kennicott 22) and led to a fateful decision: "I was on *Charlie Rose* at night, then I went into the office in the morning, and I said, you know, I'm nationally, internationally known—I could actually make a living," he told Kennicott. "So after 'Can Poetry Matter?' that's what I did" (23).

Ending an already highly successful and still upwardly mobile career as a corporate executive carries its own set of anxieties, especially economic. That was one of the reasons, after all, why Gioia elected to leave Harvard for a master of business administration degree at Stanford. Gioia asked Mary, his wife and fellow Stanford M.B.A. recipient, to come up with a fiscal game plan that would allow him to resign from

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[64] Though best known as a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet (1987) and a U.S. Poet Laureate (1993), Rita Dove, like Gioia, also writes in other genres, including essays and musical lyrics. She is equally adamant about her literary right to do so: "There's no reason to subscribe authors to particular genres. . . . I'm a writer, and I write in the form that most suits what I want to say" ("A Conversation with Rita Dove," *Black American Literature Forum* 240).

General Foods and pursue writing full time without putting them under undue financial stress. "She gave me a number and—like most people who are whizzes with numbers—it has always been the wrong number, perfectly calculated, but much smaller than it [should have been]," he recalled for Kennicott (23). Out of love for her husband and encouragement for his decision, Mary Gioia simply lowballed the figure. Inspired by her faith in him, Dana made his vocational leap of faith official on January 1, 1992.

The reasons for this radical change in his life are, no doubt, many, including the death of his first-born son: "I have never regained the patient discipline or quiet certitude of those years.[65] As I slowly emerged from my pain, I resolved to reshape my life—to build a daily existence on the things I valued most. . . . I made many changes. The most obvious one was leaving a business career" (qtd. in Brame). Another reason for that change may be that Gioia finally heeded a recurring, internal entreaty similar to this one uttered by the titular character in Bertolt Brecht's play *The Mother*: "Do not fear death so much, but rather the inadequate life" (117). A shining business career like his would seem an improbable candidate for inadequacy. Yet Gioia's decision dovetails with this Thoreau sentiment, popular to the point of almost being a cliché today: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away" (*Walden* 261).

After Gioia left General Foods at the outset of 1992, the year delivered several sure steps, most notably the publication of *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture*, his first book of criticism. Though "his literary career has had some

[65] "Those years" are 1977 to 1987, the year Michael Jasper Gioia died. It was the first decade of Gioia's split life: working at General Foods on weekdays and writing sedulously at night and on weekends.

lean years and some very good ones" (Kennicott 23), 1992 proved to be a validation for him. "When his *Atlantic* article was republished as the title piece in a 1992 collection of Gioia's essays," Haven noted, "the book sold 10,000 copies, made the finals in the National Books Critics Circle awards and was named by *Publishers Weekly* one of the best books of the year" ("Poet Provocateur" 72). Fiona McCrae, publisher and editorial director of Graywolf Press since 1994, told Haven that "for a book about poetry, that's fairly extraordinary" and added that "people are interested in what he has to say. . . . He's cultured. He's erudite. He's very confident of his position. Not his position as a poet, necessarily—he's dedicated his life to something. He's not going to dilute who he is" (qtd. in "Poet Provocateur" 72-73).

The tectonic shift caused by the titular essay in *Can Poetry Matter?* has been felt for more than two decades and proves that Gioia's instinct to leave business and focus on his literary career was correct in hindsight. "Can Poetry Matter?" certainly affected both the title and the content of "Does Poetry Matter?," a live forum featuring a panel of poets and critics in the Seattle area that was partly published in the April 1997 online issue of *The Raven Chronicles*. One panelist, Bart Baxter,[66] posed these questions to the audience at the outset:

> How many of you here tonight are poets? [Half the audience raised hands.] How many of you would like to be a poet, have maybe written some verse, or are looking for a publisher? [1/4 raised hands.] And how many here are friends of the moderator or someone on the panel? [1/4

[66] The other panelists were Ted Joans, Colleen J. McElroy, Duane Niatum, and Sharon Hashimoto. The moderator was John Olson.

> raised hands.] Now, everyone in the audience who did not fall into one of those three categories, who did not raise your hand before, please raise your hands now. [One hand was raised.] I think if Dana Gioia were here tonight, he would simply say: I rest my case. ("Does Poetry Matter? The Culture of Poetry," www.ravenchronicles.org)

In 2008 poet and Middlebury College professor Jay Parini published *Why Poetry Matters,* which can be construed as a direct answer to Gioia's essay "Can Poetry Matter?" Oddly enough, Parini discusses the merits of metered and unmetered verse with no reference to Gioia, Gioia's essay, or Gioia's first book of criticism. Was Parini trying to curtail further controversy by omitting them from *Why Poetry Matters*? Parini's apparent coyness evokes more than evades the controversy. He also virtually parrots Gioia in these statements: "Poetry doesn't matter to most people," "poets ignore the traditions of poetry at their peril," and "poets who willfully ignore the world around them risk marginality" (ix-xii). In his defense of free verse, Parini seems to take a sidelong swipe at Gioia: "There is no such thing as formless poetry, as all poetry is, by definition, form" (113). On the most obvious level, Gioia would concede the unassailability of Parini's assertion, although he would chafe at Parini's tautology: ascribing "form" to something formed. The distinction emphasized by Gioia is between effective and ineffective uses of form, whether fixed or open, not between the shaped and the improbably unshaped.

Also testifying to the ongoing influence of Gioia's "Can Poetry Matter?" is its ranking among "The 30 Best Poetry Essays of All Time" on the popular and pugnacious literary website www.scarriet.wordpress.com. The entry there reads: "20. 'Can Poetry

Matter?' – Dana Gioia: Yes, believe it or not, this one belongs to the ages*"* (October 26, 2012).[67]

The staying power of "Can Poetry Matter?" is no less obvious in "A British TV Celebrity Called for a 'Poetry Inquisition,'" Adam Kirsch's June 10, 2014, essay for *The New Republic* magazine. There Kirsch recapitulates the commotion created by BBC host Jeremy Paxman, a judge for Britain's Forward Prize in poetry, when he "called for an 'inquisition' in which poets would be 'called to account for their poetry,' which Paxman felt had 'connived at its own irrelevance'" (www.newrepublic.com). Kirsch then stated: "So far, Paxman wasn't saying more than poets themselves have said for a long time—at least since Dana Gioia asked 'Can Poetry Matter?'" (www.newrepublic.com).

As Gioia himself whimsically remarked in 2000 about his "Can Poetry Matter?" essay: "Even my enemies would admit it changed things" (qtd. in Haven, "Poet Provocateur" 73). But Gioia's so-called enemies would not limit themselves to that essay. Another one, also included in his first book of criticism, would prove almost as incendiary: "Notes on the New Formalism," reprinted from the autumn 1987 issue of *The Hudson Review*.

[67] Among the essays ranking higher than Gioia's "Can Poetry Matter?" are those by Plato, Aristotle, Dante, Shelley, Eliot, Wordsworth, Keats, Emerson, and Northrup Frye, Gioia's former teacher at Harvard, whose entry read: "19. 'The Archetypes of Literature' – Northrup Frye: Jungian rebuke of the New Criticism." Frye's essay was first published in the winter 1951 issue of *The Kenyon Review,* and material from that essay was incorporated into "Ethical Criticism: Theory of Symbols," the second essay of Frye's monumental work, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays,* published in 1957 by Princeton University Press.

Chapter 3

KEEP THE METER RUNNING

"The form is the poem's way of carrying itself, of being in the world." – Edward Hirsch

While editor in chief of *Poetry Northwest* from 1966 to 2002, David Wagoner "watched rhyme virtually disappear from the submitted poems. Fewer than one in a hundred used that once nearly required device any longer" (xxv). A poet himself, Wagoner was not lamenting the demise of rhyme but simply stating a fact in his introduction to *The Best American Poetry 2009,* for which he was guest editor. Then and now, free verse remains the norm.

Historically, free verse stemmed from a rebellion against a centuries-long hegemony of rhyme, meter, and other fixed forms in poetry. Open-form poetry finally took root in America with *Leaves of Grass,* the 1855 epic by Walt Whitman, whose bold departure from prevailing convention prompted Ezra Pound to praise him: "It was you that broke the new wood, / Now is a time for carving" ("A Pact" 180). Pound and countless others followed Whitman's example and began carving that new wood of free verse.

As its name implies, free verse sought freedom from regularity in rhyme, meter, line length, and subject matter. After World War One, modernism swept in—and swept out many of the once sacrosanct traditions and techniques to which a majority of architects, painters, musicians, and poets adhered. Notions of supposedly stiff form and stuffy formality were passé. More and more poets started to shake free of the presumed shackles of prosody and to embrace a new spirit of experimentation.

Deemed emancipating and almost jazzlike in improvisation, free verse "had a forceful and vigorous life in America before World War II" but "not until the postwar period did it become the dominant form one now encounters everywhere in magazines, in books, and at readings" (Lake 594). Free verse remained virtually unchallenged in America until Gioia and other New Formalist or Expansive poets bucked the tide in the early 1980s.

In "The Yuppie Poet," her May 1985 essay for the *AWP* (*Association of Writers & Writing Programs) Newsletter,* poet and critic Ariel Dawson offers this contemptuous observation about a fresh poetic movement already underway: "I sat in workshops with people my own age who were products of some of the weakest liberal arts educations in history, and listened as they embraced the new formalism" (5). Robert McPhillips in *The New Formalism: A Critical Introduction* (5), Matthew Brennan in *Dana Gioia: A Critical Introduction* (3), and several other critics credit Dawson's lower-cased use of "new formalism" in her essay with originating the term soon known as "New Formalism." By attacking the poetic movement she inadvertently coined, Dawson ironically gave it an identity and elevated its importance within the scholarly debate about open and closed forms. An apparent weakness or blind side in her own liberal arts education leads Dawson to dismiss what she fails to understand. New Formalism was not an idle pursuit in moony poetry workshops toward "the deification of technique" (6) but a concerted effort to recover fixed forms as options in response to the ubiquitous, allegedly depleted conventions of free verse.

The movement found its true manifesto in Dana Gioia's *Can Poetry Matter?,* a collection of essays—the seminal "Notes on the New Formalism" among them—taking

its inspiration and template from Randall Jarrell's 1953 collection of essays, *Poetry and the Age*. Gioia confirmed my hunch about this structural similarity previously overlooked by scholars. He consciously patterned *Can Poetry Matter?* after Jarrell's *Poetry and the Age* because the latter, in his estimation, was "Jarrell's critical masterpiece" (*Disappearing Ink* 233) and the best book of essays and reviews he knew. Comparing the tables of contents in both books reveals that *Poetry and the Age* clearly provides the shape of *Can Poetry Matter?*, especially in using shorter reviews as a break from longer essays. Gioia described Jarrell's "best essays, like 'The Obscurity of the Poet' or 'The Age of Criticism,'" in *Poetry and the Age* as "not merely brilliantly perceptive and effortlessly erudite. They are also passionate, funny, unruly, and touching" (*Disappearing Ink* 233).[68]

Gioia and Jarrell also share a wariness for poetry nurtured in academia, a respect for retaining form in postmodernist verse, and a willingness to comment mordantly where deserved. An example of Gioia's tartness of tone can be found in his essay "The Successful Career of Robert Bly," first published in the summer 1987 issue of *The Hudson Review* and included in Gioia's book *Can Poetry Matter?* five years later. "One can always tell when Bly is excited. He adds an exclamation point," Gioia curtly comments about "Six Winter Privacy Poems" in Bly's 1973 book, *Sleepers Joining*

[68] In 1967, two years after his death, Elizabeth Bishop wrote "An Inadequate Tribute" to Jarrell, whom she described as "the best and most generous critic of poetry I have known. . . . He always seemed more alive than other people, as if constantly tuned up to the concert pitch that most people, including poets, can maintain only for short and fortunate stretches" (*Prose* 354). In 1999 poet, essayist, and novelist Brad Leithauser called Jarrell "the best American poet-critic since Eliot" in his "Introduction" to Jarrell's *No Other Book: Selected Essays* (ix). And in his 2003 essay "Poetry's Ideal Critic: Randall Jarrell," poet, novelist, and critic Clive James noted that "if ever there was a necessary book [*Poetry and the Age*], this is it. A few more like it and there would still be a chance of saving the humanities for humanity" (*Cultural Cohesion* 84-85).

Hands ("The Successful Career of Robert Bly," *Can Poetry Matter?* 156). In that essay Gioia acknowledges that "no comprehensive account of American poetry since 1950 can ignore Bly's manifold contributions as a poet, translator, editor, critic, performer, and personality. One might even claim him as the most influential poet of the sixties and seventies" (*Can Poetry Matter?* 148). But Gioia later states that "the time for an informed and frank appraisal has arrived" (148). That appraisal is not flattering: Bly, as a poet, "is simplistic, monotonous, insensitive to sound, enslaved by literary diction, and pompously sentimental" (153-54); his "failure to build on the achievement of his best poems and his subsequent decline into self-parody make *Selected Poems*[69] a major disappointment" (160-61); and "Bly insists on being judged as a major poet, but his verse cannot bear the weight of that demand" (161).

The toughest review or critique to write is one that delivers a disinterested, balanced, and ultimately mixed reaction to a poet's oeuvre or individual work. Outright lauding or loathing is comparatively easy and, for some critics and reviewers, far more fulfilling and even fun to do.[70] In his writing about Bly, Gioia gives credit where credit is due, but he also does not pull punches where they are warranted. It is a confident critic who can do so without fear of reprisal in a future review or appraisal of his or her own work. That is the peril for reviewers "going negative": other reviewers "going negative" on them. Also, Gioia's statement that Bly "played a critical role in discrediting the American tradition of formal poetry" (148) may raise suspicions of Gioia, as one of the

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[69] Bly's *Selected Poems* was published in hardback by Perennial Library in 1986.

[70] Using an author as a personal piñata or exercise in *schadenfreude*, however, is a tendency that serious, longtime professional critics, including Gioia, steadfastly guard against in print or online. The casually applied phrases "going negative" and "going ballistic" are not synonymous. A wicked wit is one thing; an *ad hominem* attack is another. Bad critics cannot or will not distinguish between them.

leaders of New Formalism, taking Bly to task for that stance. All those vulnerabilities and all that speculation or second-guessing are part of the occupational hazards of reviewing and critiquing.

Gioia's observation that "the debate begins when one stops chronicling and begins evaluating his [Bly's] achievements" (*Can Poetry Matter?* 148) echoes Jarrell's observation that "sometimes it is hard to criticize, one wants only to chronicle" ("A Verse Chronicle," *Poetry and the Age* 176). But as Jarrell resolutely states, "Taking the chance of making a complete fool of himself—and, sometimes, doing so—is the first demand that is made upon any real critic: he *must* stick his neck out just as the artist does, if he is to be of any real use to art" ("The Age of Criticism," *Poetry and the Age* 87). Regarding what he calls "the verse of people who cannot write poems," Jarrell sticks his own neck out by not sparing the rod in summing up their efforts: "It is as if the writers had sent you their ripped-out arms and legs, with 'This is a poem' scrawled on them in lipstick" ("A Verse Chronicle," *Poetry and the Age* 176-77). Rooted in comprehensive knowledge, close reading skills, and ample examples, the sometimes stinging literary verdicts by Gioia and Jarrell reflect their frustration with mediocrity (or worse) and their zeal for excellence in verse. They believe that unflinching honesty in criticism strengthens its credibility as well as the reader's ability to gauge the gap between what is praised and what is panned. In the minds of Gioia and Jarrell, unearned encomium is the cardinal sin of criticism.

In placing *Poetry and the Age* "among the finest writing about literature ever done in America," Gioia makes a piquant point: "By the end of an essay, it hardly matters if one agrees with Jarrell. In his exuberant company, the journey itself was unforgettable"

(*Disappearing Ink* 233). The same is arguably true of at least two core essays in Gioia's *Can Poetry Matter?*: the titular essay, previously discussed, and "Notes on the New Formalism."

Nearly as factious as "Can Poetry Matter?" was Gioia's essay "Notes on the New Formalism." Again he took an aggressive stand: "Form, we are told authoritatively, is artificial, elitist, retrogressive, right-wing, and (my favorite) un-American. None of these arguments can withstand critical scrutiny" ("Notes on the New Formalism," *Can Poetry Matter?* 30). He also took an additional poke at academia: "Certainly a major reason for the decline in poetry's popular audience stems directly from the abandonment of this aural education [memorization and recitation] for the joylessly intellectual approach of critical analysis" ("Notes on the New Formalism," *Can Poetry Matter?* 31). Both statements may overreach in their disdain. After all, admirers of open-form poetry and ardent practitioners of critical analysis do not necessarily oppose fixed-form verse and "aural education." But Gioia's vehemence attempts to realign and bring more balance to this debate over the composition and appreciation of poetry.

His critics pounced once more. In his essay "Neo-Formalism: A Dangerous Nostalgia," Ira Sadoff argues that "a poetry of fixed forms can only console; it cannot transform" (13). In his essay "The New Formalism," Alan Shapiro states that "formal elements provide nothing but a badge of affiliation, a kind of aesthetic tattoo or Good Housekeeping seal—they distinguish these poems from the standard fare of free-verse lyrics, but they animate and reveal no particular insight or understanding" (211). For Sadoff, New Formalism is limited to a consoling familiarity *sans* transcendence, while for Shapiro, New Formalism is a stalking horse for cliquishness devoted to superficiality.

In her polemical essay "Against Decoration," first published in *Parnassus* (Vol. 16, No. 2, 1991) and later included as an afterword in her book of verse *Viper Rum,* poet and memoirist Mary Karr lambastes "the neo-formalist stuff" for its "absence of emotion" and "lack of clarity" (*Viper Rum* 51-52) and, in excoriating some of the poems in Robert Richman's *The Direction of Poetry: Rhymed and Metered Verse Written in the English Language Since 1975,* she states: "If this is poetry, let us write prose" (61). Even though Karr adds, "I defend formal verse and approve neo-formalist goals—a revival of rich language and a literary history all but ignored since the free-verse revolution" (67), she decries what she perceives to be New Formalism's decoration, or "highbrow doily-making" (71), replacing "the poetry that made our pulses race, that could flood us with conviction and alter our lives" (72). For her, formal meter and rhyme in contemporary verse too often represented a veneer for less than serious thinking or provided a safe haven from it through merely clever cadence.

The contentions of Sadoff, Shapiro, and Karr, however, seem willfully myopic in light of the many accomplished poets who frequently write in rhyme with transformative understanding and insight about untrivial subject matter, such as war, death, and failure. Among those sober-minded rhyme-smiths are Richard Wilbur, Maxine Kumin, Charles Martin, and even Anthony Hecht, whose narrative poem "The Mysteries of Caesar" comprises a dozen rhyming quatrains.

Born in 1969, Joshua Mehigan is a U.S. poet of rising stature who also belongs in that group, as his second volume of verse, *Accepting the Disaster,* published in 2014, demonstrates. "Only a reader alert to the use of form, of rhythm, meter, and rhyme, will appreciate the mastery Mehigan shows in these poems," Adam Kirsch notes in his very

positive review in the July 3, 2014, issue of *The New Republic*. Kirsch does not stop with just praising Mehigan's command of form: "What matters in *Accepting the Disaster* is the way form disciplines speech, breaking sentence rhythms across line rhythms, giving Mehigan's language gravity and permanence" (www.newrepublic.com). Those two statements by Kirsch about Mehigan's verse constitute a cogent, if unintended, refutation of the objections raised by Sadoff, Shapiro, and Karr to New Formalism.

Interestingly, when Mehigan was earning a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing (poetry) during 1992-94 at Sarah Lawrence College, one of the graduate courses he took was entitled "Poetic Form," taught by Dana Gioia, an acknowledged early avatar of New Formalism. Mehigan and Gioia have much in common: a clear skill for rhymed or metrical verse, English translations of Eugenio Montale's Italian poetry, admiration for the verse of Donald Justice, and participation in the West Chester University Poetry Conference. During the twentieth-anniversary conference of June 4-7, 2014, Mehigan gave a three-day workshop on "Expressive Rhythmic Variation," while Gioia gave a one-day workshop on "The Poetic Line." Both also gave public readings of their verse there.

Nonetheless, in his foreword to *The Swallow Anthology of New American Poets,* published in 2009, J. D. McClatchy described Joshua Mehigan, who has ten poems in the book, and the other 34 poets (including Adam Kirsch, who has six poems in the anthology) as those who "seem simply to have ignored the ideological wars that had raged in the magazines for half a century," and that those poets "haven't been blinded by fealties or hardened against traditional ways" (xx). "Some of these poets would be called formalists, others not," McClatchy added. "But all of them are craftsmen[71] rather than

[71] McClatchy's use of "craftsmen" was not intended to be gender-specific. Molly McQuade, Priscilla Becker, Erica Dawson, Joanie Mackowski, Catherine Tufariello, Deborah Warren, A. E. Stallings, Pimone

bards. They know how to knead and turn, glaze and fire. Their sense of poetic form is less the virtuosic display than the sign of care being taken to shape a thought or ease an emotion into unexpected consequences" (xxi).

According to Robert McDowell in his essay "Expansive Poetry: A Brief History" for the winter 2001 issue of *The Sewanee Review*, critic and poet Diane Wakoski's politically fistic essay "The New Conservatism in American Poetry" for the May-June 1986 issue of *American Book Review* is yet another attack on formal contemporary verse in which she scolds New Formalist poets for choosing what McDowell summarizes as the "easy solutions, Eurocentric blindness, and emotional insecurity" of writing in meter and rhyme (120). No "easy solutions," however, are detectable in the difficult crafting of a sestina in free verse, a double triolet, and an iambic pentameter fugue by Gioia in "My Confessional Sestina," "The Country Wife," and "Lives of the Great Composers," respectively. Gioia, who proudly wrote an essay entitled "On Being a California Poet," and two of his central poetic influences, Robert Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Bishop, hardly suffered from "Eurocentric blindness." And denigrating the decision to write in meter and rhyme as "emotional insecurity" is itself an example of emotional insecurity. Wakoski's arbitrary restraints contradict the founding impulse behind the free verse she favors. Why deny any poet access to all the tools of poetry or, as Gioia observed, "the full resources the English language offers?" ("Notes on the New Formalism," *Can Poetry Matter?* 41).

A crucial, combative essay, "Notes on the New Formalism" helped to make the book *Can Poetry Matter?* a sensation inside and outside academic circles. It turned Gioia

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Triplett, J. Allyn Rosser, and the late Rachel Wetzsteon are among the thirty-five poets in *The Swallow Anthology of New American Poets*.

into "the most controversial poet-critic in America," an observation made in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature,* edited by no less than Jay Parini (115). Gioia's impassioned plea for the re-inclusion of general readers as well as rhyme, meter, and narrative in poetry provoked his more hostile critics to derogate him as someone who "is out to eradicate free verse, repeal the modernist revolution, and inaugurate an era of philistine poetics" (Bawer, "The Poet in the Gray Flannel Suit" 108).

Even if Gioia's audacity or anger sometimes incited censure from his critics, it is a grave misreading of his motives and objectives to impute a narrow notion of verse philistinism to him. He is no literary Luddite seeking to roll back progress or the clock. He merely seeks more openness toward closed forms of poetry. Also, to imply that prosody itself is a philistine undertaking ignores or defies the long history of poetry, where rhyme and meter far outweigh free verse. As Gioia himself whimsically puts it: "I think, therefore iamb" (Haven, "Poet Provocateur" 75).

Rallying support for New Formalism, Expansive Poetry, and Gioia's defense of both were such scholars as Kevin Walzer, David Mason, Mark Jarman, April Lindner, H. L. Hix, Janet McCann, and Robert McPhillips, who stated what was obvious but still not universally acknowledged: "By the end of the 1980s, the New Formalism had become the most widely discussed poetical movement of the decade" (*The New Formalism* 5). They argued that too many critics of New Formalism[72] and Expansive Poetry were missing the

[72] Poet and critic Paul Breslin believes "it may be useful to distinguish a 'high' New Formalism—that of Brad Leithauser, Mary Jo Salter, and Gjertrud Schnackenberg, for instance—from a 'low' version practiced by, say, Gioia, Andrew Hudgins, and Molly Peacock"("Two Cheers for the New Formalism" 144). For Breslin, "the 'high' new formalists seem at ease in meter; one doesn't feel, as one sometimes does with Gioia or Hudgins, that they are painting by numbers" (144), and "'low' New Formalism is an earthier affair than the high variety" (145). Splitting New Formalism into these separate camps on the basis of such sketchy empirical evidence, however, hardly advances an understanding of either. Also, suggesting that Gioia is not "at ease in meter" is clearly contradicted by the plethora of polished metrical poems written by him. It is hard to imagine any serious poet willfully plying forms with which he or she is continually

point: meter and rhyme should also have a ready room in the house of contemporary American poetry. Inclusionists, they joined open-form advocates in rejecting Robert Frost's oft-quoted quip, "I had as soon write free verse as play tennis with the net down" ("Poetry and School," *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays* 809). New Formalism advocates and poets believe that open-form verse and fixed-form verse are not dichotomous or inherently antagonistic. Each seeks the same goal: engagement and enrichment for the reader.

Consequently, poets writing in fixed forms soon worried that the term "New Formalism" was becoming synonymous with constriction of scope and inflexibility of application. The term was "usually thought inadequate even by its adherents," admitted Mark Jarman and David Mason in their preface to *Rebel Angels: 25 Poets of the New Formalism* (xvii). This growing uneasiness led to the adoption of the more accommodating term "Expansive Poetry," a coinage stemming from poet Wade Newman's terms "Expansive Movement" and "Expansive Poets" in his essay "Crossing the Boundary: The Expansive Movement in American Poetry," published in "Expansionist Poetry: A Special Issue" of the journal *Crosscurrents*, edited by poet Dick Allen (Vol. 8, No. 2, January 1989, www.expansivepoetryonline.com).

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uncomfortable. Lending more muddle to this superfluous taxonomy is poet and critic Stephen Cushman's 2014 *Southwest Review* essay, "On Middlebrow Formalism, or the Fallacy of Imitative Form Revisited." Using an awkward analogy of "capitalist economies" and bull and bear market "periodic corrections," Cushman asserts that the "interest in the formal patterns of verse has been enjoying a bullish stretch for perhaps a decade now, and it is a time for a correction" (Vol. 99, No. 4, www.poems.com/special_features/prose/essay_cushman_form.php). What "correction" is necessary when the practice of closed and open forms in poetry over the past decade, if not longer, has become more balanced? In skewering the need for all three brows, novelist, essayist, and critic Thomas Mallon believes only one brow ultimately matters: "the furrowed one" ("Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow—Do These Kinds of Cultural Categories Mean Anything Anymore?" *The New York Times Book Review* 31).

Within this more clarifying, encouraging enlargement of scope, Expansive Poets pointed to pop songs as examples of the public's long-term affection for meter and rhyme. If poetry is an aural medium, stressing what Gioia called "the primacy of the physical sound of language" ("Notes on the New Formalism," *Can Poetry Matter?* 31), then rhyme and meter can re-engage and re-energize the large audience who formerly greeted poetry with the same receptivity as popular music.

Gioia made the link overt between pop music and poetry in "Cruising with the Beach Boys" in *Daily Horoscope,* his first volume of verse, published in 1986. The poem comprises four, iambic pentameter octaves with often alternating exact or slant end-rhymes, and Robert McPhillips refers to it as "perhaps the poet's most disarming lyric" (*The New Formalism* 38).

In the second stanza Gioia deftly adumbrates the rhythmic, lyrical sway of the unnamed Beach Boys's song randomly heard on a car radio one night while his poem's narrator, who admits it is "a tune I haven't heard for years" yet he "can't believe I know the words by heart" (5), describes his own inept effort at singing along:

> A primal scream in croaky baritone,
> The notes all flat, the lyrics mostly slurred,
> No wonder I spent so much time alone
> Making the rounds in Dad's old Thunderbird. (5)

"Cruising with the Beach Boys" ends in contemplation of what is gained and lost in the nostalgia for "every lovesick summer" and "nights left behind" (5) conjured by that song, which

> Can open up a door and let them fall

> Tumbling like boxes from a dusty shelf,
>
> Tightening my throat for no reason at all
>
> Bringing on tears shed only for myself. (6)

In that last line and in an earlier line where he chides himself as "The Cecil B. DeMille[73] of my self-pity" (5), the poem's narrator both acknowledges and mitigates the tendency toward self-indulgence by using meter and rhyme to provide "just enough formality to objectify the speaker's emotions" (McPhillips, *The New Formalism* 39). Thus the lachrymal yields to the lapidary, and form reins in feeling, making it more potent by avoiding prosaic mawkishness.

No matter how loosely readers analyze "Cruising with the Beach Boys," few would have trouble understanding it and recognizing its rhythmic, rhyming structure at least intuitively. Echoing Jarrell, Gioia regards the most elemental reaction to verse as a victory for poet and reader alike. Meter and rhyme give more than form to verse. They give it music, bolstering attraction and retention for readers. As British radio broadcaster and poet Seán Street explains in *The Memory of Sound: Preserving the Sonic Past:*

> Gioia's poem eloquently captures the way music can come under our conscious radar and surprise our emotions. As in the poem, this can be about a state of being, restoring the way we were as people, our habits, idiosyncrasies and immaturities even more than about specific interactions; it is a connection with the emotional being we were, time

[73] Cecil Blunt DeMille (1881-1959) is widely regarded as the father of the motion picture blockbuster because of his fame as a movie director of large-scale epics, such as *The Ten Commandments* (both the 1923 silent film and the 1956 "talkie"), and other spectacles, such as *The Greatest Show on Earth* (a 1953 film of circus life). Thus Gioia's phrase "The Cecil B. DeMille of my self-pity" skillfully distills the adult narrator's conflicted memory of inflated but still wounding failures in adolescent ardor summoned by the song.

> exposing that person again, interrogating them in today's light through experience and by turning the past into a new present through the power of song. (67)

In that context the term "Expansive Poetry" is a demonstrably better fit for Gioia's equal skill in writing rhymed and unrhymed poetry, as he explains here:

> Working in free verse helped keep the language of my formal poems varied and contemporary, just as writing in form helped keep my free verse more focused and precise. I find it puzzling therefore that so many poets see these modes as opposing aesthetics rather than as complementary techniques. ("Notes on the New Formalism," *Can Poetry Matter?* 41)

That salutary effect of free verse on keeping Gioia's formal poems "contemporary" does not imply that rhymed verse might otherwise lack contemporary relevance. The rhymes in "Cruising with the Beach Boys" have a conversational fluidity that avoids the metrical trap of a style calling attention to itself or dating itself. His poem uses the music of rhyme to shape the meaning of music for him. Form not only conveys content but also becomes it. The poem is a nimble evocation of a point made by Noel Coward in his play *Private Lives*: "Extraordinary how potent cheap music is" (207). Applied to the unnamed song described in Gioia's poem, "cheap" can be construed as "pop," which the poem's narrator "pretended to despise" (*Daily Horoscope* 5). Besides, what could be more timelessly "contemporary" than listening to a favorite song on a car radio?

For such New Formalist and Expansive poets as Gioia, Brad Leithauser, Gjertrud Schnackenburg, Charles Martin, Tom Disch, Molly Peacock, Mary Jo Salter, R. S.

Gwynn, Timothy Steele, and Marilyn Nelson, everything old seemed new again. They were happy to leap forward by stepping backward. It was no longer a crime to rhyme.

The inroads made by New Formalists and Expansive Poets also had a growing gestalt effect on many adherents of free verse. Even if they did not turn to overt rhyme or conscious meter, some of them began to acknowledge the importance of a central, governing structure within their own work. Mary Oliver, one of the most celebrated free-verse writers in America, emphasized this need: "A poem requires a design—a sense of orderliness. Part of our pleasure in the poem is that it is a well-made thing" (*A Poetry Handbook* 58).

Free verse, then, is no exception. Though it may not rhyme, well-made free verse deftly employs the rise-and-fall cadence of everyday speech, careful diction and syntax, and illuminating imagery to elicit what Coleridge called a "willing suspension of disbelief" in readers. According to Gioia, "Only the uninformed or biased can fail to recognize that genuine poetry can be created in both modes," metrical and nonmetrical, fixed and open forms ("Notes on the New Formalism," *Can Poetry Matter?* 41). The question is not which mode works better but which mode works better in any given poem.

New Formalism and Expansive Poetry directly address this question of which mode works better in any given poem. Each mode represents an option, not a fiat, for writing verse. If a fixed form can heighten the impact of its content better than free verse, poets should feel comfortable in making that choice. If rhyme and meter start to choke off the windpipe of content, free verse is probably the smarter choice for needed oxygen. To

expose readers to any struggle stemming from a poor selection or application of form is to risk their estrangement.

Gioia reiterates Wordsworth and Coleridge's insistence in the preface to their *Lyrical Ballads* that the first obligation of poets is to give pleasure to readers. Gioia also argues for the music of well-shaped verse and against what he calls "disembodied poetics" tethered to sterile theories. As he told me, the primary and primal purpose of poetry is enchantment, which captivates part of the listener's conscious mind so that the poem can go more deeply and touch emotions, memories, and imagination. That spell gently convinces the reader to collaborate with the poem rather than hold it at a distance. If visual poetry operates at a disadvantage because what readers see is by definition outside them, aural poetry becomes a conduit for readers to hear the music of rhyme, rhythm, and meter inside their bodies. For Gioia, the best poetry today excites both the visual and aural senses.

That idea of readers collaborating with the poem is a basic tenet of reader-response criticism, asserting that a poem is not a self-contained or autonomous object (touted by New Criticism) but instead a shared creation of author and reader, who is an active maker of meaning in the text.

Gioia describes himself as not so much conservative as primitive, even primal. He likes a poem to communicate not only through language but also underneath it as sounds apprehended physically by the whole body. For him, poetry at its most effective should be an experience beyond that obtained through simple reading. Like great music, a great poem should stir the senses and awaken the soul along with the mind and heart.

Poets and critics Mark Jarman and David Mason set Gioia's conviction about verse's ability to affect readers completely within the historical arc of other poetic movements: "The rediscovery of meter by younger writers reminds us that language requires renewal by each succeeding generation" (*Rebel Angels* xviii). In that context, bucking ingrained poetic trends is cyclical. Just as New Formalism and Expansive Poetry tried to renew the prevailing poetic language that relies so heavily on open forms, free verse tried to renew the previously prevailing poetic language that relied so heavily on fixed forms. Since the pioneering free verse of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass,* succeeding generations of U.S. poets have grappled with a Hamlet-like dilemma: to rhyme or not to rhyme.

Many now use or fuse the two, and perhaps no living poet does it with more concision than Kay Ryan. Gioia considers her an Expansive Poet at heart because of her "dense figurative language, varied diction, internal rhyme, the interrogative mode, and playful *vers libre,* which elusively alternates between iambic and unmetered lines. . . . Her hidden rhymes and metrical passages only become fully apparent when the poem is spoken aloud" ("Discovering Kay Ryan," *Disappearing Ink* 137). This aural quality of Ryan's verse deepens the experience of reading it.[74] Meaning partly emanates from the *frisson* of a wittily executed rhyme not predictably placed at the end of a line. The reader encounters Ryan's rhymes almost serendipitously, like brightly colored conch shells on a beach.

[74] I experienced for the first time the aural quality of Kay Ryan's verse when I attended her reading on October 15, 2008, in Dolan Performance Hall of the College of Saint Elizabeth in Morristown, New Jersey. Her appearance was part of a distinguished writers series overseen by CSE Professor of English Laura Winters, from whom I was taking a graduate creative-writing course during that fall semester at Drew University. In the series Dr. Winters also hosted such poets as Seamus Heaney, Mary Oliver, Donald Hall, Maxine Kumin, W. S. Merwin, Lucille Clifton, Mark Doty, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Stephen Dunn.

In New Formalism and Expansive Poetry, rhyme has a reason, and poets weaned on both happily cleave to it. The twenty-five poets represented in the *Rebel Angels* anthology, for example, "came of age as writers in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, and are still developing their art" (xix). Their verse in that collection displays a wide-ranging interest in fixed forms, some quite exotic or rare, such as anacreontic, hudibrastics, triolet, and xaxa pararhymes. In particular, the seven poems by Gioia in the book variously use iambic pentameter, iambic tetrameter, unrhymed tetrameter, double triolet, tercets, alternating quatrains, sestina (in free verse), xaxa rhyme scheme, blank verse, ballad meter, and an adapted musical form, fugue. They are not flights of poetic ego or esoterica but careful selections of fixed forms to "shape words, images, and ideas into meaning" (Gioia, "Notes on the New Formalism," *Can Poetry Matter?* 41).

At the back of *Rebel Angels*, the editors provide an "Index of Forms" and a "Key to the Poems," linking individual poems to fixed forms both common (blank verse, couplet, tercet, quatrain) and uncommon (monosyllabic or exploded sonnet, dactylic dimeter). Identifying the forms of the poems after they are read extends the technical appreciation of each and serves as a reminder that verse, whether metrical or not, must first capture the imagination of the reader. "Art has no enemy so deadly as dullness" (xxi), Gioia states in his preface to *100 Great Poets of the English Language,* an anthology he compiled and edited in 2005. He understands that for many readers the pleasure of poetry stems less from recognizing fixed forms than from delighting in their effect.

In *100 Great Poets of the English Language,* Gioia includes open and closed forms of verse by poets well known and less known. Among the latter are Donald Justice

and Weldon Kees (1914-55), two American poets whose ingenuity with fixed and open forms of verse slipped gradually into academic neglect. Attempting to reverse that inattention, Gioia edited the book *Certain Solitudes: On the Poetry of Donald Justice* in 1997 and wrote the essays "Tradition and an Individual Talent (Donald Justice)" and "The Loneliness of Weldon Kees" in *Can Poetry Matter?* as well as "Donald Justice" and "The Cult of Weldon Keys" in *Disappearing Ink*.

Two other poets championed in Gioia's criticism derive from firsthand experience: Robert Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Bishop. Both exerted a strong, enduring influence on Gioia's sensibility as a poet and poetic thinker during 1973-75, his years as a graduate student at Harvard.

As briefly mentioned earlier in this dissertation, Gioia took "English 283: The History of English Versification" and "Comparative Literature 201: Studies in Narrative Poetry" with Fitzgerald in the fall of 1974. These two courses collectively required memorization, scansion and other close reading, firm grasp of story line and characters, and original verse writing. "I say 'verse' because I expect nothing so exalted as poetry from these assignments," Gioia recalls Fitzgerald telling him and the other students in "The History of English Versification" course. "Each week I will ask you to craft a short passage according to the rules of a particular form. Do not worry about creating art. Worry only about making sense and displaying impeccable prosody" (qtd. in Gioia, "Learning from Robert Fitzgerald" 89).

Fitzgerald taught two key precepts of what eventually became known as New Formalism: reapplying prosody with skill and subtlety and renewing the central value of narrative in poetry. A genial but exacting instructor, Fitzgerald "always focused on

specifics. He combined the classicist's devotion to unraveling, word by word, the meaning of a passage with a poet's delight in how those words work together to create a memorable effect" ("Learning from Robert Fitzgerald" 83).

Gioia made the connection between Fitzgerald's teaching in those courses and the rise of a new poetic movement. "He became a crucial mentor to a disproportionate number of the young poets who later emerged as the so-called New Formalists," Gioia points out. "No one imagined such a movement at the time, and it is unlikely that Fitzgerald intended to create a revival of formal and narrative verse" ("Learning from Robert Fitzgerald" 95).

Nevertheless, the planks Fitzgerald laid down in those two courses during the 1970s also became planks in the foundation for New Formalism during the 1980s. Though not all are New Formalists, Brad Leithauser, Mary Jo Salter, Elise Paschen, David Rothman, Rachel Hadas, Robert Shaw, Katha Pollitt, April Bernard, Judith Baumel, and Cynthia Zarin are other former Fitzgerald students at Harvard who are "conspicuously interested in formal poetry" or "demonstrate formal proclivities" in their verse, according to Gioia ("Learning from Robert Fitzgerald" 96). Fitzgerald's indelible imprint is apparent in this admission from a fellow student quoted by Gioia: "If he was our Odysseus, he had more than one Telemachus" ("Learning from Robert Fitzgerald" 96). In Homer's *The Odyssey* the reunion of father and son, after a long separation, mirrors the overdue reunion of prosody and contemporary verse for those future poets. So profound was the effect of Fitzgerald on Gioia that in addition to writing the essay "Learning from Robert Fitzgerald" for the spring 1998 issue of *The Hudson Review*, he

dedicated all of part two (comprising six poems) in *Daily Horoscope,* his first book of verse, "in memory of Robert Fitzgerald" (23).

Fitzgerald's lessons in prosody informed the lessons prepared by Gioia for giving his own occasional college course on versification. He customarily asks to teach poetic form rather than a standard workshop in college. The class handouts he copied and sent to me were lengthy, detailed, and engagingly written. In his 21-page breakdown of recognizing and writing in iambic pentameter, for example, Gioia provides scores of scansion examples for spondees, pyrrhics, diphthongs, caesurae, and headless lines. A 16-page handout explained various forms of free verse, again abetted by numerous examples. In a whimsical prosodic homage to "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" by Wallace Stevens, one of his favorite poets, Gioia sent me his "Thirteen Ways of Thinking about the Poetic Line" and "Thirteen Ideas about Writing Poems." The influence of Fitzgerald is all over these handouts, modeled after the mimeographed sheets kept by Gioia from Fitzgerald's courses.

Toward the end of "Learning from Robert Fitzgerald," Gioia distills the deep, dual impact of Fitzgerald's instruction on him:

> Teaching hovers between two realities. First, there is the material overtly being taught. Then there is what one really learns, which may have little to do with the announced curriculum. So much of what one absorbs comes neither from lesson nor lecture but from example. The way a person teaches inevitably becomes an essential part of what is taught. Robert Fitzgerald was a splendid teacher in both ways. (97)

Also noteworthy about this patently tender portrait of Fitzgerald by Gioia is how skillfully he avoids any whiff of the cheap sentiment and easy uplift disdained by both writers.

Toward the end of Gioia's "Learning from Robert Fitzgerald" essay is a gimlet-eyed insight into his mentor's abiding influence as a poet: "His own verse occupies an important place in the history of American Catholic poetry" (97). The adjective "American Catholic" is by no means a backhanded compliment from Gioia, an American Catholic educated in parish schools as a child. Fitzgerald was the only "openly practicing Catholic" professor and poet encountered at Harvard by Gioia, who looked on him as a role model.

Gioia insists that Elizabeth Bishop, whose "English 285: Studies in Modern Poetry" course he took in spring 1975 at Harvard, influenced him almost exclusively by example. No doubt it is why he wrote an essay about her entitled "The Example of Miss Bishop," in which he states, "Ultimately Bishop reminded one of the poet's duty to be true to his or her own sensibility and experience, no matter how deeply at odds they might be with prevailing fashions" (*Can Poetry Matter?* 220). In another essay by Gioia, "Studying with Miss Bishop," he mentions "hundreds of marks" made by her on his final term paper, which he wrote on Austrian poet George Trakl. Gioia gave me a photocopy of his 23-page term paper, showing Bishop's corrections, queries, and suggestions snaking above and below the text, between the lines, and down the margins. Though this photocopy shows only black ink, Bishop used red and blue ink and blue pencil, Gioia told me. The lone graduate student in her course, he read her remarks "in horror. . . . I had been weighed in the balance and found wanting" ("Studying with Miss Bishop" 98).

In perusing the sea of Bishop's comments on Gioia's term paper, I also was stunned by her meticulous, almost ruthless attention to detail. "Awful word," "redundant," "avoid when possible," "this isn't necessarily true," "repetitious," "nonrestrictive clause," "restrictive clause," "who says?" "a slip?" "a mouthful," "awkward," "not in the dictionary," and "No!" dominated the pages amid a scattering of "good" and "yes" jottings in the margins. At the bottom of the last page Bishop wrote this: "awesome, awful."

Attached to the term paper was a letter from Bishop to Gioia that read in part: "You'll see that I have made many, many small marks and suggestions on your paper, but this is really because it is very good, very well-expressed, and I'd just like it to be even *better*-expressed, and, here and there, to read more smoothly" ("Studying with Miss Bishop" 98).[75] Gioia also noticed several revisions by Bishop in her letter. She was as tough on her own writing as she was on her pupils'.

Bishop's exactitude in marking Gioia's term paper revealed much more than a personal example of a poet to emulate. He had read all her volumes of verse, so he came to her course with a complete grounding in her poetry. That preparation, assigned readings, memorization of at least ten lines from a poem each week, her rigorous marks on his final term paper, and her observations dutifully logged by him in class completed an intense level of instruction Gioia would carry thereafter in his verse.

[75] For the record, Gioia earned the only A in the class for his term paper and received an A for the course. While researching among the Elizabeth Bishop Papers of the Vassar College Libraries Archives and Special Collections housed on the ground floor of the Vassar College Main Library, I found Bishop's own tinily hand-scrawled grade sheet that she probably used for quick reference in that course. Next to "D. Gioia" she jotted "good (big words)" (Elizabeth Bishop Papers 71.6 P.19).

Moreover, Bishop expressed a poetic philosophy or methodology similar to Gioia's. In *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments,* edited and annotated by former *New Yorker* poetry editor Alice Quinn, Bishop reveals that "the three qualities I admire in the poetry I like best are: *Accuracy, Spontaneity, Mystery*" (208).[76] Her comment bears a kinship to this comment made by Gioia in an interview with Robert Lance Snyder in the journal *Christianity and Literature:* "The impulse of my poetry originates mostly in mystery, anxiety, and uncertainty" (102). Bishop and Gioia are not far apart in attitude or approach. "Mystery" is common to both, "spontaneity" can produce "anxiety," and "accuracy" can cure "uncertainty." The two poets are meticulous in their diction and use rhyme and meter to sharpen and discipline their verse.

No less important to Bishop and Gioia is tapping into the full associative power unleashed by the words they choose. Alice Quinn noted that Bishop's "lists and lists of end rhyme words make it clear that she looked to rhyme to drive and refine her intuitive thinking on the basis of the unfettered associations that rhyme yielded up" (Bishop, *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box* 273). In his essay "The Poet in an Age of Prose," Gioia states that "by successfully employing the word or image that triggers a particular set of associations, a poem can condense immense amounts of intellectual, sensual, and emotional meaning into a single line or phrase" (*Can Poetry Matter?* 221). Bishop's and

[76] In his foreword to *The Swallow Anthology of New American Poets*, J. D. McClatchy interpreted Elizabeth Bishop's three "markers of a good poem" this way: "*Accuracy* is not literalism or pedantry; it is the ability to see and describe things as, at first glance or second thought, they truly are. *Spontaneity* is not improvisation or loafing; it is a fresh apprehension of the uneven textures of life. *Mystery* is not profundity or spirituality; it is the ability of a poem to clear space for what couldn't before have been anticipated, even by the poem itself—the passing thought or startling image that makes a thrilled reader stop and wonder. This is what good poems do" (xxi).

Gioia's love for verse stems from its hidden labor, and both writers expend as much effort or time as they need to craft and hone a poem before releasing it into the world.[77]

All these traits were nascently evident in Gioia's writing for the graduate courses taught by Fitzgerald and Bishop at Harvard. He credits Fitzgerald for encouraging him to register for Bishop's course: "Robert knew that hers was the class I should be taking. Only the writers recognized Bishop's merit" (qtd. in Fountain and Brazeau's *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop* 296). She saw in Gioia the same potential as Fitzgerald did. Both were the sole faculty supporters of Gioia's decision to depart Harvard's English Department before earning his Ph.D. and enroll in the M.B.A. program at Stanford's Graduate School of Business for the fall of 1975. A key reason he left Harvard was that, apart from the courses with Bishop and Fitzgerald, Gioia felt he was drifting into the habit of writing "poems to be interpreted rather than to register on the imagination, emotions, and intuition" (qtd. in Fountain and Brazeau's *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop* 296). Neither Bishop nor Fitzgerald wanted the budding poet in Gioia to be suppressed by an inevitable immersion in literary theories and other strictly scholarly pursuits. Sadly, those two Harvard instructors so special to Gioia would not be alive to see their faith in him yielding full fruit with the publication of *Daily Horoscope* eleven years later.

[77] Gioia admitted to me that it took him up to sixteen years to complete "Pity the Beautiful" and "Special Treatments Ward," two poems published in his 2012 volume of verse, *Pity the Beautiful*. "If a line bothers me in a poem, I won't publish it," he explained.

Chapter 4

PRESS AGAINST THE SURFACE OF IMPENETRABLE THINGS

"We teach ourselves to write the kinds of poems we like to read." – Ted Kooser

Dana Gioia "is perhaps the most versatile poet associated with the New Formalist movement" (92) who "performs, again and again, the duty of the truly original artist: he enables us to see the world anew" (96), critic Robert McPhillips stated in his essay "Reading the New Formalists" that appeared in the winter 1989 issue of *The Sewanee Review*. "Dana Gioia may well be the strongest poet of his generation," concluded McPhillips. What is a little startling is that he based his judgment solely on Gioia's first volume of verse, *Daily Horoscope,* published three years earlier and lauded by McPhillips for "the consistent excellence of the poems" (92).

McPhillips was not alone in his praise. "Gioia demonstrates in *Daily Horoscope* why he is much more than a primary example of a New Formalist," Robert McDowell observes in his essay "New Schools & Late Discoveries," published in the winter 1987 issue of *The Hudson Review*. "Whether he is writing in traditional forms or not, . . . he is a superb poet whose care in treating content, nuance, mood, and language comes through in every poem" (673).

Robert E. Knoll joined the chorus of encomium in his review of *Daily Horoscope* for the fall 1986 issue of *Prairie Schooner*: "This is Dana Gioia's first volume, and it has been worth waiting for. Here are some fifty poems, of varying lengths and kinds, not a weak piece in the lot. . . . This is mature work" (122) and "a considerable accomplishment" (125).

In his review for the *Library Journal* of May 1, 1986, J. Patrick Lewis called *Daily Horoscope* "an auspicious beginning, certain to receive close attention and high praise," and "a collection worth coming back to" (122).

For the spring 1988 issue of *The Literary Review,* Colorado College Professor of English and former Colorado poet laureate David Mason takes up the canonical cudgel for Gioia in his review of *Daily Horoscope:* "The beginning of criticism lies in primitive questions: 'Am I moved or affected by these lines?' and 'Are they memorable?' In the case of Dana Gioia's first collection, the answers to both questions are resoundingly affirmative" ("Five Poets" 367). Mason adds: "Gioia has not included a single poorly written poem in all of *Daily Horoscope*. Its publication engenders gratitude and renewed faith in the powers of the art" ("Five Poets" 369). And in "The Inner Exile of Dana Gioia," his essay in the winter 2015 issue of *The Sewanee Review* that was based on the lecture he gave on February 14, 2014, at The University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, to mark Gioia's Aiken Taylor Award in Modern American Poetry, Mason amplified his earlier assessment of *Daily Horoscope*: "Though its poems vary greatly in form and subject, they are clearly the work of a refined sensibility—witty, knowing, haunted" (136).

Even in his mixed review of *Daily Horoscope* for the October 1986 issue of *Poetry* magazine, poet, essayist, critic, librettist, *Yale Review* editor, and Yale Professor of English J. D. McClatchy[78] concedes the author's stature as a poet: "Gioia's is a sure skill. A dozen or more poems here—a high percentage in anyone's book—testify to it" ("Mortal Listeners" 40). McClatchy's numerical reference, much like those from Randall

[78] During my sophomore year (1970-71) at La Salle University in Philadelphia, I took an honors English "Great Books" course taught by McClatchy. Even then, his polymathy was impressive.

Jarrell and Joseph Epstein on the subject of good or great poetry and poets, arguably carries a waft of canonical appreciation.

In the preface to his 2003 book, *The New Formalism: A Critical Introduction*, essayist and critic Robert McPhillips recounts his initial reaction to reading *Daily Horoscope*:

> I was delighted, first and foremost, by this book's sophisticated yet congenial and coherent voice and only subsequently realized that part of my pleasure in reading this book derived from the meter and rhyme employed in many of its finest poems. In fact, I experienced the type of pleasure reading *Daily Horoscope* that I used to feel when first listening to a concept album by singer-songwriters Joni Mitchell and Bruce Springsteen. (xi)[79]

Also, in his essay "Dana Gioia and Visionary Realism," published in *Dana Gioia: A Descriptive Bibliography with Critical Essays* in 2002 and included in *The New Formalism: A Critical Introduction* in 2003, McPhillips asserted that "in an ideal world, *Daily Horoscope* would have established Gioia as a major poet." According to McPhillips, impeding that impulse was Gioia's association with New Formalism, leaving him "open to generic attacks for . . . allegedly politically retrograde politics and aesthetics . . . rather than to careful readings of his individual poems" (*Dana Gioia: A Descriptive Bibliography with Critical Essays* 260).

[79] McPhillips's analogy of his first-blush enthusiasm for *Daily Horoscope* with that for Joni Mitchell and Bruce Springsteen concept albums may be pop-cultural overreach, but it certainly conveys how strong his embrace of Gioia's early poems was.

Leading that countercharge against Gioia was Greg Kuzma, a poet, essayist, and professor emeritus of English at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, whose 1988 review of *Daily Horoscope* was entitled "Dana Gioia and the Poetry of Money" in *Northwest Review*. In their monographs on Gioia, April Lindner and Matthew Brennan each cite Kuzma's review as either myopically or excessively caustic. Possibly they would have ignored it if they did not think it was damaging, evident in these remarks by Kuzma: "The fault I find with Dana Gioia is that his poetry is the poetry of leisure, or ease, or idle pleasures. I have called it the poetry of money because what it values most are material things and what it promotes is an aesthetic based on what one can afford" (114). This *idée fixe* never lets up in Kuzma's review. He calls Gioia "already comfortable" (114), referring in all likelihood to his business success, and "the first poet I have read whose chief intention is to warn us to protect our investments" (118). Kuzma further labels Gioia's verse as "the poetry of privilege" (114).

But the seeds of Kuzma's disapproval can be detected in his autobiographical reaction to Gioia's poem "In Cheever Country" and especially to these two stanzas:

> But splendor in ruins is splendor still,
> even glimpsed from a passing train,
> and it is wonderful to imagine standing
> in the balustraded gardens above the river
> where barges still ply their distant commerce.
>
> Somewhere upstate huge factories melt ore,
> mills weave fabric on enormous looms,

and sweeping combines glean the cash-green fields.

Fortunes are made. Careers advance like armies.

But here so little happens that is obvious. (20-21)

"Ruined splendor, lost wealth, obsess this poet," Kuzma claims. "Perhaps he [Gioia] fears bankruptcy most of all things" (118). Then Kuzma responds to both stanzas together: "I find it rather difficult to accept this vision as either valid or humane. My father worked in one of those 'huge factories' upstate from 'Cheever Country,' and was made deaf there, and spiritually damaged, and my brother killed himself in a car rather than accept the same fate" (119).

Only a stone-hearted scholar would question or contradict the sincerity and emotion of that response by Kuzma to those two stanzas in Gioia's poem. And in fairness to Kuzma, he is not alone among reviewers who have noted "a major theme in the poetry of Dana Gioia is that of work and money" (Stefanile 39). Nevertheless, as Lindner points out, "Kuzma fails to notice that these gently chiding lines are less concerned with wealth than with loss itself, whether due to bad business sense or the passage of time" (17). Like Lindner, Brennan believes that to read "In Cheever Country" and the other poems in *Daily Horoscope* "as Kuzma does is to read them superficially" (25).

Further evidence of pigeonholing Gioia is detectable in J. D. McClatchy's Cheeveresque dubbing of *Daily Horoscope* as "a poetry of the suburbs" ("Mortal Listeners" 39), and even David Mason admitted that "conceivably Gioia could be criticized for writing about the suburbs" ("Five Poets" 369). At the time a resident of Hastings-on-Hudson, a suburban village in Westchester County, New York, Gioia thus became associated with so-called suburban verse almost by default.

This linkage was repeated in an August 16, 1992, *New York Times* article about him, "Walking Away from Corporate Security for the Life of Poet," in which the author Paul Helou noted that "some critics have admonished him for writing poems in praise of the suburbs" (21), and in a January 12, 2003, *New York Times* article about an upsurge of poetry culture in Westchester County that featured resident poets Billy Collins, Kathleen Ossip, Margo Stever, Kate Knapp Johnson, and Cindy Beer-Fouhy. "The suburbs, Westchester in particular, inspired Mr. Gioia's poetry," Lisa W. Foderaro stated in her article "With the Poet Laureate, Billy Collins, as a Neighbor, the County Is Rife with Readings, Slams and Open Mikes" (www. nytimes.com/2003/01/12).

Billy Collins set the record straight on Gioia and the subject of the suburbs: "The bad reputation of the suburbs probably grows from the fact that the suburbs are neither here nor there. . . . They are not the mother primeval and it's not the city, either." To Collins, Gioia "is a 'broader poet' than the label *suburban* implies. . . . 'Because he was also working for a corporation and he talks about taking Metro-North, he was identified or misidentified as poetry's answer to John Cheever'" (qtd. in Foderaro).

In *Daily Horoscope* such poems as "Eastern Standard Time" in free verse, "Men after Work" in loose stress verse, and "The Man in the Open Doorway" in ballad meter deal with work, money, or the suburbs. But even if the perception of Gioia as a poet preoccupied with all three subjects is true, why would it matter in the context of content? Should verse eschew so-called suburban themes or topics of business, work, and money, all interdependent aspects of how the vast majority of Americans pursue their livelihoods? Should Philip Levine (1928-2015) have avoided writing poetry drawn from or inspired by his own experiences working the night shift at Detroit's Chevrolet Gear

and Axle factory, among other industrial jobs he had? If the verse of Levine, who was U.S. Poet Laureate during 2011-12, served to puncture *infra dig* stereotypes of blue-collar workers, why could not the verse of Gioia or any other "already comfortable" poet serve to dispel *infra dig* stereotypes of white-collar workers? To assume they all sport gray flannel suits and gray flannel minds is patently silly.

That is not an apologia for capitalism but an admonishment about any attempt to restrict the subjects for poetry. The liberty to write in fixed forms, free verse, or both is not inherently different from the liberty to write on any subject a poet chooses. More importantly, it is less about the choice itself than about how well the choice is executed that finally determines what is bad, mediocre, good, or great poetry. No matter how tastes change from one poetic era to another, a great subject expressed in grating writing will never become great verse.

The controversy created by New Formalism may have cultivated some of the negative reviews of *Daily Horoscope.* The national attention Gioia garnered from inclusion as a prominent poet-businessman in "The Best of the New Generation: Men and Women under Forty Who Are Changing America" in the December 1984 issue of *Esquire* magazine may have spurred some additional backlash, based on cultural impressions of corporate executives epitomizing mammonism. To think that all or most negative reviews of *Daily Horoscope* somehow emanated from a distaste for New Formalism or corporate America, however, seems excessive.

When poet and reviewer Michael Milburn in his fall 1992 *Harvard Review* essay, "A Second Opinion: Diagnosing the Poetry Doctors," admits that "Dana Gioia's comments struck me as spot-on, but please don't make me read his first book, *Daily*

Horoscope, again" (35), he is entitled to his antipathy for the latter. Where Milburn is vulnerable to criticism is in his essay's utter lack of cited lines or passages supporting his dislike of Gioia's poems. Reproof without proof is itself subject to reproof. Readers expect reviewers to be specific not only about *what* poems provoke delight or derision but also about *how* they do so.

A dispassionate analysis of several outstanding poems in *Daily Horoscope* can highlight their canonical stature, and included in that cluster is "In Cheever Country," the bête noir for Kuzma. What Kuzma and virtually all critics and scholars have failed to identify in this poem is the geographic inspiration for its reference to "splendor in ruins is splendor still": the Untermeyer Gardens in Yonkers, New York. Gioia had accidentally discovered them while he was walking down the nearby Old Croton Aqueduct trail in Westchester County.

Prominent New York lawyer Samuel Untermyer (1858-1940), who had a keen interest in horticulture, commissioned designer William Welles Bosworth in 1912 to create the soon-to-be nationally famous Beaux Arts gardens. "By the time Bosworth finished, 30 gardens spilled across Untermeyer's sloping 150-acre site, offering glorious views of the Hudson and the Palisades," according to Lee Lawrence in "New York Pairidaeza, Back in Bloom" in the July 30, 2013, *Wall Street Journal* (D5). The gardens were in disrepair at the time Gioia first found them, and "In Cheever Country" evokes the impression made by the gardens on him: a decaying but still discernible glory fighting the inherent folly of manmade monuments intended for perpetuity, much as Percy Bysshe Shelley described in his Shakespearean sonnet of 1818, "Ozymandias." And like Shelley,

Gioia proves that desired timelessness can be achieved far more readily in a notable poem than in the edifices or gardens it describes.

Comprising five-line stanzas of free verse with an echo of blank verse, "In Cheever Country" presents the view of the poem's narrator as a commuter—"to know this country / see it from a train"—where "one trip without a book or paper / will show enough to understand / this landscape no one takes too seriously." Other commuter train passengers are too tired or too engrossed in reading or conversing to peer out and ponder what passes by them in the dimming sunlight. Gioia peppers his poem with such Cheever fictional landmarks as "Clear Haven, Bullet Park, and Shady Hill" showing "that developers at least believe in poetry / if only as a talisman against the commonplace" (19). Routine becomes revelatory in the almost spiritual vision that Gioia provides his poem's narrator: "The passengers / standing on the platform turn strangely luminous / in the light streaming from the palisades across the river. . . . If there is an afterlife, let it be a small town / gentle as this spot at just this instant" (20).

Also, Kuzma and many other critics have failed to acknowledge any of Gioia's deft integrations of near-quotes and paraphrases of, as well as outright homages to, Cheever's unique prose style and stories, while some other critics, such as J .D. McClatchy in "Mortal Listeners" and Robert McPhillips in "Dana Gioia and Visionary Realism," acknowledge the presence of them without specifically identifying any. What is especially surprising about this lack of citation is that one of Cheever's most famous and anthologized short stories, "The Five-Forty-Eight," inspired some central images and tableaux in Gioia's poem "In Cheever Country." Examples include "the filth on the window glass was streaked" (Cheever 241) and "Through the rattling / grime-streaked

windows" (Gioia 19), and particularly "It was time to go home, time for a drink, time for love, time for supper, and he could see the lights on the hill—lights by which children were being bathed, meat cooked, dishes washed—shining in the rain" (Cheever 246) and Gioia's last stanza, "And this at last is home, this ordinary town / where the lights on the hill gleaming in the rain / are the lights that children bathe by, and it is time / to go home now—to drinks, to love, to supper, / to the modest places which contain our lives" (21).

So when poet and critic Robert Peters quotes liberally from Gioia's last stanza in order to disparage it as "Easy Listening Poetry, for sure" ("Commuter Poetry: Dana Gioia's *Daily Horoscope*" 52), he misses both what is obvious and what is subtle. As Matthew Brennan points out, "In the final stanza, then, the speaker accepts his 'ordinary town / where lights on the hill are gleaming': it is a 'modest' place and contains his life, but it's a place sanctified by love, home, and the light of imagination" (*Dana Gioia: A Critical Introduction* 27-28). Or as critic April Lindner observes, "Gioia achieves a reconciliation with the landscape. The narrator of 'In Cheever Country' finds beauty in a static domestic tableau. . . . The poem concludes with a vision of family life as a source of consolation" (22-23). By quoting often from Gioia's last stanza as proof of "Easy Listening Poetry," Peters ironically supplies proof of just the opposite.

Another poem of canonical merit in *Daily Horoscope* has likewise escaped proper source identification by critics and reviewers: "In Chandler Country." According to Robert McPhillips, the poem "incorporates snippets from Raymond Chandler's atmospheric southern California detective novels" ("Dana Gioia and Visionary Realism" 39), yet he quotes no examples. April Lindner prefaces her quotation of the entire third

stanza of "In Chandler Country" with these awkward, vague words: "Gioia's appropriated narrator says things like" (*Dana Gioia* 21).

Neither McPhillips nor Lindner seems aware that Gioia uses the opening paragraph from Raymond Chandler's short story "Red Wind," initially published in *Dime Detective Magazine* in January 1938,[80] as inspiration for some of his own lines in the poem. Here is Chandler's opener in its entirety:

> There was a desert wind blowing that night. It was one of those hot dry Santa Anas that come down through the mountain passes and curl your hair and make your nerves jump and your skin itch. On nights like that, every booze party ends in a fight. Meek little wives feel the edge of the carving knife and study their husbands' necks. Anything can happen. You can even get a full glass of beer at a cocktail lounge. ("Red Wind," *Collected Stories* 685)

Compare that with this loosely inspired parallel in Gioia's own opening stanza: "California night. The Devil's wind, / the Santa Ana, blows in from the east, / raging through the canyons like a drunk / screaming in a bar" (7). Gioia's simile nimbly distills Chandler's early description of the inebriated murder victim sitting in a bar in "Red Wind," who is initially called Waldo and later identified as Joseph Coates. "'Rye!' the drunk croaked" not long before he is fatally shot twice ("Red Wind" 686). Another, overt parallel in Gioia's poem is these lines from his third stanza: "and quiet women in the

[80] Between 1933 and 1939, Raymond Chandler published twenty-one so-called pulp detective short stories for *Black Mask*, *Detective Fiction Weekly*, *Dime Detective Magazine,* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. Besides "Red Wind," these short stories included "Blackmailers Don't Shoot," "Smart-Aleck Kill," "Killer in the Rain," and "Trouble Is My Business" ("Select Bibliography," *Collected Stories* xxiv-xxv).

kitchen run / their fingers on the edges of a knife / and eye their husbands' necks" (7). Also, Gioia's reference to "coins" in the fourth stanza echoes the murdered man's dimes stacked in front of him on the bar in "Red Wind."

The poem's narration takes the form of a dramatic monologue through Gioia's constructed voice for Philip Marlowe, the famous private detective in such Chandler novels as *The Big Sleep* (1939), *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940), and *The Long Goodbye* (1953). Gioia seamlessly imitates the verbal tics, tart wit, and gumshoe argot of Marlowe, who ruminates over his failure to protect the life of a client, evident by "the sheeted body lying on the sand" of a lake (7). Yet the reader does not become aware of this failure until six lines from the end when Marlowe's troubled reverie is abruptly interrupted: "'Taking good care of your clients, Marlowe?'" (8). This single line of sarcasm represents the only other voice in the poem and serves as an explicit rebuke. The poem itself flows from effect to cause to effect, that is, from the sultry "Devil's wind" (a loose translation of *Santana*) contributing to "another sleepless night" for the already agitated Marlowe narrator, to the dead young woman dragged from the lake, to "the wind blows on" as "packs of coyotes come down from the hills / where there is nothing left to hunt" (8). Gioia describes those coyotes as "lean, furious, raw-eyed from the storm," all adjectives that could just as easily describe Marlowe, the narrator. According to Samuel Maio, "By the end of the poem, we may know the speaker better than he knows himself—or better than he wants us to know" ("Dana Gioia's Dramatic Monologues" 66). The fact that the cause of the young woman's death is never revealed in the poem leaves the reader as intentionally incomplete as the narrator.

Kuzma, McClatchy, McPhillips, and Lindner, however, can find some redemption for their lack of specific citations for Gioia's inventive borrowings from Chandler and Cheever in this statement by Gioia during an interview published in the autumn-winter 1994 issue of *The Irish Review*:

> "In Chandler Country" and "In Cheever Country" both incorporate prose quotation from Raymond Chandler and John Cheever. In both cases they are homages to those writers. In each case, Raymond Chandler writing about Los Angeles, the city I was born and raised in, and John Cheever writing about Westchester County, where I lived for the last eighteen years, I found a way of talking about my native or adopted landscape refracted through a rather eccentric literary tradition. I like doing that, but it has to be done in a way that someone who doesn't know the sources can still read the poem through. I like writing poems that have a surface which executes one shape and a subtext which executes another. Those are the poems which give me most pleasure. (Cartwright 113)

In *Daily Horoscope* "some of the strongest poems center on a character" (19), stated Matthew Brennan, who cited "Bix Beiderbecke (1903-1931)" as a prime example. But Brennan never explains why it is one of the volume's strongest poems, and most other literary critics have also shied away from fully analyzing it perhaps because jazz is too often deemed esoteric and thus outside their ken or comfort zone. What gets lost in this kneejerk aversion, if true, is the fact that jazz during the 1920s not only gave its name to an American era—"The Jazz Age," a coinage credited to F. Scott Fitzgerald[81]—but

[81] In his preface to the 1992 edition of *The Great Gatsby*, Matthew J. Bruccoli noted that "Fitzgerald's work has become automatically identified with an American decade: The Jazz Age (which he named) or

also reigned as America's most popular form of music. Back then, big bands were big in mainstream appeal, finding fame through radio exposure, record sales, and concert tours by car, bus, or train. In his essay "Bix Beiderbecke and the Jazz Age" Ted Gioia, Dana's younger brother and one of the most discerning jazz critics in the United States, observed that "for early jazz players . . . their tales of nomadic adventures almost overshadow stories of the music" and "almost from the start, jazz went on the road" (*The History of Jazz* 70).

Written in blank verse, Gioia's poem is a deft evocation of the itinerant life of a jazz musician in the 1920s and envisions Bix Beiderbecke traveling by car in January 1926 with his bandmates, including alto saxophonist Jimmy Dorsey[82] "driving" and C-melody saxophone player Frankie "Tram" Trumbauer "still asleep" (42). The first line of the poem comprises the titles of three tunes closely associated with Beiderbecke: "*China Boy. Lazy Daddy. Cryin' All Day*" (42). They each convey his uniquely lyrical, chimelike cornet style, to which fellow cornetist Louis Armstrong responded viscerally: "I'm tellin' you, those pretty notes went right through me" (qtd. in *The History of Jazz* 73). Gioia evokes a similar impression in his poem: "He [Beiderbecke] dreamed he played the notes so slowly that / they hovered in the air above the crowd / and shimmered like a neon sign" (42).

The Roaring Twenties or The Boom" (8-9). In *So We Read On: How* The Great Gatsby *Came to Be and Why It Endures*, Maureen Corrigan states that "*This Side of Paradise* made him [Fitzgerald] the sage of what he'd dubbed the Jazz Age in 1920" (27).

[82] Dana Gioia confirmed for me that the poem's "Jimmy" referred to Jimmy Dorsey, who had played with Beiderbecke and Trumbauer in both the Jean Goldkette Orchestra and Trumbauer's own band.

That bright musical reverie of Beiderbecke, dozing in the car, is quickly brought to earth by some harsh realities: “the club stayed dark, trays clattered in the kitchen, / people drank and went on talking. He watched / the smoke drift from a woman’s cigarette / and slowly circle up across the room / until the ceiling fan blades chopped it up” (42). These are the distractions and ennui often faced by jazz musicians plying their art in nightclubs, and Gioia renders them with a swift, sure touch. When Davenport, Iowa-born Beiderbecke recognizes “the stupid face of small-town innocence” (42) as his own, the reader realizes the toll that hard traveling (“There was no distance in these open fields— / only time”) and hard living (“His head still hurt from drinking”) had on the cornetist, who “died at twenty-eight in New York of a combination of pneumonia and the effects of alcoholism,” according to *Bix: Man and Legend*, an acclaimed 1974 biography by Richard M. Sudhalter and Philip R. Evans with William Dean-Myatt (7).

Possibly Gioia consulted the biography’s “Appendix A: Who, What, Where & When? A Bix Beiderbecke Diary” (pages 341-99) or a similar text for a better idea of the demanding schedule kept and countless miles logged by Beiderbecke and his fellow musicians. In his poem Gioia uses the dateline “January, 1926,” and this line, “Where were they anyway? Near Davenport?” (42), and the first entry under “1926” in “Appendix A: Who, What, Where & When? A Bix Beiderbecke Diary” is “Jan. 1 (Fri)—Bix returns to Davenport for brief holiday visit with his family” (355). The car trip vividly described by Gioia in his poem, of course, springs from his imagination and reliable sense of the rigors of the road for many musicians during that era.

Though published in 1999, thirteen years after *Daily Horoscope,* Richard M. Sudhalter's *Lost Chords: White Musicians and Their Contribution to Jazz, 1915-1945,*[83] includes a chapter, "Bix Beiderbecke and Some of His Friends," strongly avowing the cornetist's jazz achievements as "a revolutionary musical figure" (417). In *Lost Chords* Sudhalter also analyzes and praises Beiderbecke's playing of the three tunes cited by Gioia at the outset of his poem: "China Boy" (especially in pp. 452-53), "Lazy Day" (note 6 on p. 785), and "Cryin' All Day" (especially in pp. 421-22). Gioia would certainly have agreed with Sudhalter's assessments of both Beiderbecke and his playing of those three tunes. But as Margo Jefferson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning critic formerly with *The New York Times,* said on camera in Ken Burns's ten-part, twenty-hour documentary series *Jazz* in 2001, the musical potential of Beiderbecke, widely considered "the first great white jazz star,"[84] likely suffered from racial segregation to the extent that he could not freely play or openly associate with, and thus learn firsthand from, highly gifted—and, in some cases, more virtuosic—black musicians (*Jazz,* Episode Three, "Our Language [1924-1929"]). The concluding lines of Gioia's poem "Bix Beiderbecke (1903-

[83] In *Lost Chords* Sudhalter states that "Philip R. Evans, in researching *Bix: Man and Legend,* seemed determined to account for every day in his subject's brief life and came remarkably close to achieving his goal" (411).

[84] My own introduction to the music of Bix Beiderbecke came in 1961 at age ten when my parents deemed me old enough to watch the 1955 movie *Blackboard Jungle,* set in a tough, inner-city high school. In that film, based on an Evan Hunter novel and directed by Richard Brooks, a mathematics teacher and jazz collector named Joshua Y. Edwards, played by actor Richard Kiley, puts a shellac 78-rpm recording on a phonograph in his classroom. After alluding to the mathematical principles of music, Edwards says to his students, "This is Bix Beiderbecke doing 'Jazz Me Blues.' Listen to this. Pay attention to that cornet" (*Blackboard Jungle* DVD, chapter 18, 2005). Artie West, a student played by Vic Morrow, proceeds to smash Edwards's prized record collection. Unlike West and his classmates, I paid attention to the distinctive cornet heard on that 1927 recording of "Jazz Me Blues" by Bix Beiderbecke and His Gang.

1931)"[85] hint at the cornetist's frustration and blunted ambition: "He lit a cigarette and closed his eyes. / The best years of his life! The Boring 'Twenties. / He watched the morning break across the snow. / Would heaven be as white as Iowa?" (42). Gioia's use of the adjective "white" is not merely meteorological.

Perceptions of geography and weather lie at the core of "California Hills in August," one of Gioia's most accomplished and anthologized poems. Comprising five five-line stanzas of free verse, the poem can be unevenly divided between the first four stanzas, dealing with an imagined "Easterner" who "found / these fields unbearable" (4), and the last stanza, a dramatic reversal of that impression from a native Westerner accustomed to a deceptively sere terrain. Gioia himself, of course, is a native Californian/Westerner and a former adopted Easterner, but his poem takes on a resonance well beyond autobiography in its delineation of how viewpoints about landscape can harden almost imperceptibly through habit as well as habitat. Easterners surrounded by dense, verdant flora during late summer can have trouble recognizing the natural virtues of California's "dry / twisted shapes of black elm, / scrub oak, and chaparral, a landscape / August had already drained of green" and "the bright stillness of the noon / without wind, without motion, the only other living thing / a hawk, hungry for prey, suspended / in the blinding, sunlit blue." The final stanza represents a radically different view of the same supposedly desolate California topography by the poem's speaker:

> And yet how gentle it seems to someone
>
> raised in a landscape short of rain—

[85] Reinforcing the canonical worth of this poem is its inclusion in *The Jazz Poetry Anthology*, a 1991 book edited by poets Sascha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyakaa, and *Jazz Poems*, a 2006 anthology edited by poet Kevin Young.

the skyline of a hill broken by no more

trees than one can count, the grass,

the empty sky, the wish for water. (4)

If one of the goals of poetry is to challenge or explode preconceived notions and to unveil the beauty latent in the presumably unbeautiful, then "California Hills in August" most emphatically succeeds in attaining that goal.

As previously discussed, the motifs of California and music blend in "Cruising with the Beach Boys." In a BBC Radio 3 interview conducted by Michael Donaghy on October 8, 1991, Gioia admitted it was "an autobiographical poem" and added that "if you were an intellectual in the late 60s, you couldn't admit to liking the Beach Boys' music. It was a love that dare not speak its name" ("Third Ear: Dana Gioia Interview," *Poetry Matters* 40).[86] Gioia obviously chose to ignore that snobbish stigma. As he informed me, the songs of the Beach Boys were part of the music to which he—and millions of other American teenagers—danced in high school.

Critical opinions of the poem range from delectation to dismissiveness, from "perhaps the most memorable poem in *Daily Horoscope*" and its "crown jewel" (Mark Royden Winchell, "Dana Gioia," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature* 115) to "'Cruising with the Beach Boys' is little different from hundreds of other workshop poems from the 1970s or 1980s" (Walzer, *The Ghost of Tradition: Expansive Poetry and Postmodernism* 42). Hardly a workshop poem, "Cruising with the Beach Boys" adeptly

[86] The winter 1991 issue of *Poetry Matters* included a transcript of this broadcast interview. A distinguished poet and critic himself, Michael Donaghy (1954-2004) was born to Irish immigrant parents in New York, raised in the South Bronx, educated at Fordham University and the University of Chicago, and lived in London from 1985 until his death from a brain hemorrhage.

confronts the poem's narrator, an adult "Travelling on business," with the adolescent he once was in Los Angeles, and thus becomes a cogent clash between past and present during an unbeckoned moment of wistfulness.

As with "In Chandler Country" and "In Cheever Country," scholars have so far failed to identify at least some of the allusions in "Cruising with the Beach Boys." Nor have they posited any candidate for the unnamed Beach Boys' song heard over a rental car radio that triggers the emotional and mnemonic response of the poem's narrator. Of course, Gioia may have wanted the song to retain or represent anonymity, which would allow readers to plug in whatever song evokes a similar reaction in them. Still, the poem offers some clues.

A perhaps too obvious candidate would be "God Only Knows," the title of a Gioia free-verse poem appearing later in *Daily Horoscope* (38) that also happens to be the title of a Beach Boys' song from their acknowledged 1966 masterpiece, *Pet Sounds*. "It's a really, really great song" and "a big favorite of mine," said the Beatles' Paul McCartney, who regarded *Pet Sounds* as "the record of the time" (qtd. in Jim Fusilli's *Pet Sounds* 99, 111).[87] The root spiritual nature of Gioia's "God Only Knows," describing a congregation of "burghers / squirming in their pews" who sing a "final chorus" in church "to save their souls" (38), also aligns with the spiritual underpinnings of the Beach Boys' "God Only Knows," which Brian Wilson, who co-composed it, admitted "came out of prayer sessions in the studio" ("No. 025, God Only Knows" in *The 500 Greatest Songs of*

[87] The Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds*, which was inspired by the Beatles' *Rubber Soul* in 1965, inspired what is widely considered the greatest rock-pop album ever made, the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* in 1967. See p. 86 in *The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time*, a special collectors issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine (December 11, 2003), where *Sgt. Peppers* is ranked No. 1, *Pet Sounds* is ranked No. 2, and *Rubber Soul* is ranked No. 5.

All Time in a special collectors issue of *Rolling Stone*, December 9, 2004, 86). On January 27, 2014, when asked "What do you feel is the absolute best song that you've ever written?" Brain Wilson replied "'God Only Knows'" ("Ask Brian Live Q&A," www.brianwilson. com/news).[88]

Though it is tempting to suggest the song "God Only Knows" as the lead contender for the unnamed song in Gioia's "Cruising with the Beach Boys," more likely it is "Fun, Fun, Fun" from the band's 1964 album, *Shut Down, Vol.* 2. The poem's titular reference to "Cruising," which Gioia originally had as "Cruisin'," and the poem narrator's references to "Making the rounds in Dad's old Thunderbird," "Lost like the girls that I could never get," and "junked with the old T-bird" (*Daily Horoscope* 5-6) seemingly reflect these "Fun, Fun, Fun" lyrics: "Well, she got her daddy's car / And she's cruisin' through the hamburger stand now," "A lotta guys try to catch her / But she leads them on a wild goose chase now," and "now that daddy took the T-bird away" (www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/beachboys/funfunfun.html).

Among other *Daily Horoscope* poems pertaining to music is "Lives of the Great Composers." In his "Notes on the Poems" at the back of the book, Gioia states that "this poem is cast as a verbal fugue in a form suggested by a poem of Weldon Kees" (89).[89]

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[88] Brian Wilson's interest in what he termed "rock church music" (www.albumlinernotes/Friends__20_20. html) was not limited to "God Only Knows." During September-October of 1966, the same year that *Pet Sounds* was released, Wilson recorded "Our Prayer," a contemporary hymn written by him and sung in vocalese. Little more than a minute long, the track first appeared on the Beach Boys' 1969 album, *20/20*.

[89] Another literary influence on Gioia's "Lives of the Great Composers" is Paul Celan's "Todesfuge," or "Death Fugue," read in the original German by Gioia at age nineteen. It is a stunning, intricate, vivid eliciting of nightmarish WWII German concentration camp experiences told to Celan, a Romanian Jew, by survivors. Celan's poem relies on vivid imagery and phrasal repetition, variation, and counterpoint to approach in words what a fugue accomplishes in music.

That poem by Kees is "Round" and was partly critiqued by Gioia in his essay "Naked Kees,"[90] initially published in *Verse* (Vol. 14, No. 3, 1998) and later posted on his website (www.danagioa.net/essays/ekees2.htm). In it Gioia describes the éclat of Kees's feat: "Quotations, clichés, proper nouns, foreign words, brand names, syntactic fragmentation, contrasting levels of diction, and repetition as well as rhyme and meter are only a few of the specific techniques used to sustain the novel musical structure governing the poem."[91]

In classical music a fugue is a contrapuntal composition, that is, the playing of different voices, or tunes, at the same time.[92] This simultaneity is much more difficult to achieve in poetry, where linear restraints pose a particular challenge. Yet Gioia in "Lives of the Great Composers" uses a radio that "goes off and on" (36) as a conceit to simulate fugal interplay accomplished through juxtaposition and repetition (with variation) of quotations, biographical insights, and such external details as rain and lightning. Comprising four stanzas of nine lines each, "Lives of the Great Composers" offers the

[90] In this essay Gioia recounts how he "first read Weldon Kees by accident . . . in the bicentennial summer of 1976" when he "was working in Minneapolis." One of the many books Gioia checked out of the Edina Public Library there was *Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms,* published in 1969 and edited by Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey. The title of Gioia's essay, "Naked Kees," was no doubt prompted by the title of that anthology, containing eighteen poems by Kees, "Round" included. "The poems haunted me," Gioia notes in his essay. Not quite as serendipitously as Gioia, I first encountered Kees's verse in the same book, assigned in one of my undergraduate poetry courses at La Salle University in Philadelphia. My copy was a $2.95 Bobbs-Merrill paperback. I still have it, and I know I read at least one poem by Kees, "Aspects of Robinson," because it shows my pencil underlining of select images and phrases—and double underlining of the last five words in the last line, "His sad and usual heart, dry as a winter leaf" (*Naked Poetry* 86).

[91] A round is a song style where the same melody is sung contrapuntally by three or four voices. Kees's "Round" can be found in *The Collected Poems of Weldon Kees,* edited by Donald Justice (U. of Nebraska Press, 1975), and in *Twentieth-Century American Poetry,* edited by Dana Gioia, David Mason, and Meg Schoerke with D. C. Stone (McGraw, 2004).

[92] One of the most popular examples is Johann Sebastian Bach's Fugue in G minor, BMV 578, often known as the Little Fugue, composed in four voices for organ.

four voices of Anton Bruckner, Hector Berlioz, Robert Schumann, and the poem's narrator; the contrapuntal voices of Gustav Holst, Joseph Haydn, and Niccolò Paganini; exposition in stanza one; development in stanzas two and three; and a coda, or finale, in stanza four. The overall effect of this structurally ambitious poem is an uncanny evocation of emotions never explicitly stated. "Lives of the Great Composers" takes abstract, overlapping threads or themes common to a fugue and makes them textural in iambic pentameter verse. Though fairly esoteric, this poem is no small tour de force for Gioia and only bolsters a canonical case for his daring in form.

Besides "Lives of the Great Composers," "Cruising with the Beach Boys," and "In Chandler Country," the last of which mentions a "crackling radio" (7), at least four other poems in *Daily Horosc*ope cite or imply the presence of a radio and frequently describe its stimulative effect: "An Elegy for Vladimir de Pachmann," "The Memory," "Parts of Summer Weather," and "Sunday Night in Santa Rosa." The broadcast medium conspicuous by its absence in *Daily Horoscope* is television, a ubiquitous staple of suburban life that Gioia, if he were truly obsessed with all things suburban, would no doubt have injected into his verse. That omission is not an accident. Relying principally on the visual, television tends to deliver preformed imagination rather than kindle it unformed as radio does. At its most efficacious, the exclusively aural medium of radio constitutes a paradox, broadcasting unilaterally to an anonymous, potentially vast public listenership while ushering each listener into an implicit, intimate, one-to-one conversation especially through music. The ultimate power of radio lies less in its transmission reach than in its personal and emotive reach.

Gioia understands that. For example, the first-person narrator of "Parts of Summer Weather," a poem of four iambic tetrameter quatrains about a vivid dream of love long gone, notes that "Upstairs a radio plays out / the songs we've overheard together" (74). And in the loosely iambic tetrameter "The Memory," the "you" at the heart of the poem is commanded to ignore a reminiscence that is "like a snatch of an old song" and to admit that "All you'll get for searching / is just the sense of having left / something important in a place / you can't get back to" and that "You've never been there, never had / anything to lose, and whatever / comfort you remember in the words / is an illusion" (46). The final injunction is telling: "Turn on the radio and listen / to someone else's loneliness." The operative verb of radio, "listen" occurs in the first line and penultimate line of "The Memory," which acts as a sharp rejoinder to "Cruising with the Beach Boys." Just because radio has the power to conjure closeness and establish often profound connections solely through sound does not mean radio's impact is always desirable or pleasurable. Gioia understands that too.

His application of fixed and open forms in poetry expertly meshes with the varying subjects contained in those forms throughout the rest of *Daily Horoscope*. In just three, six-line stanzas of stress verse, "Insomnia" shows "what Gioia can be good at" (114), states an otherwise captious Kuzma. As in John Cheever's famous short story "The Enormous Radio," where the voices of the occupants in a tall apartment building are suddenly heard over a married couple's old radio that is "sensitive, unpredictable, and beyond repair" (*The Stories of John Cheever* 33), the house described in "Insomnia" yields its voices too: "Pipes clanking, water running in the dark, / the mortgaged walls shifting in discomfort" and "the venting furnace, the floorboards underfoot, / the steady

accusations of the clock numbering the minutes" (18). These nighttime noises, including "the murmur of property, of things in disrepair, / the moving parts about to come undone," are at one point likened to "the sounds of a family / that year by year you've learned how to ignore" and at another point summon "the faces you could not bring yourself to love." At the center of the poem is a sleepless homeowner, addressed as "you," who confronts "The terrible clarity this moment brings, / the useless insight, the unbroken dark," and wonders "How many voices have escaped you until now." The poem is a masterful enumeration of seemingly random house sounds echoing the "failures and disappointments" of the insomniac, and "Gioia's use of the second person serves a dual purpose by momentarily implicating the reader and by enabling Gioia to avoid the appearance of Confessionalism" (Lindner, *Dana Gioia* 23-24).

The compactness of "Insomnia" is also evident in "Photograph of My Mother as a Young Girl," a poignant portrait by the poem's narrator of his or her mother. This free-verse poem begins "She wasn't looking / when they took this picture," immediately alerting the reader that the mother is caught in an unaware, unposed posture not subject to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle: the observation of a phenomenon alters its behavior. The mother is oblivious not only to the camera trained on her but also to her own parents who "chatted and watched" (71). Consequently the usual guard of self-consciousness is gone. She is wholly, naturally herself: "sitting on the grass / in her bare feet / wearing a cotton dress, / she stares off to the side / watching something on the lawn / the camera didn't catch." The irony is that the camera catches her in what it didn't catch, thereby deepening the inscrutability of a mother the narrator never met—the young girl on the grass. And so the narrator speculates that "the lawn was a like a mirror, / and

she sat watching herself, / wondering who she was / and how she came to be there / sitting in this backyard, / wearing a cheap, white dress, / imagining that tomorrow / would be like all her yesterdays." A painting analogue to this poem might be Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World*, in which a young woman, also wearing a simple dress, lies half-upright in the grass and stares off into the distance. The central image of both Gioia's poem and Wyeth's painting is rendered indelibly yet retains an air of hermetic mystery. The poem's narrator, gazing "years later" at the photograph, is too distant "to interfere," but that leaves a different mystery: What would the narrator say or do if he could?

A twenty-line single stanza of very loose blank verse, "The Letter" can be divided into three distinct parts: a lament over a perceived omission, possible explanations for why, and a stubborn adherence to futile hope.

The poem begins with a complaint voiced by most people at one time or another: the lack of a clear, unambiguous message from a higher power that offers guidance and direction for life's critical choices. No one wants to approach the end of his or life with

> a feeling—strong and unavoidable—
> That somehow we deserved something better.
> That somewhere along the line things
> Got fouled up. And that letter from whoever's
> In charge, which certainly would have set
> Everything straight between us and the world,
> Never reached us. Got lost somewhere. (86)

The tone of this poem could have easily descended into an annoying, self-pitying, woe-is-me whine, but Gioia quickly leavens it with humorous possibilities in the second section, where the narrator suggests that the letter was

> Possibly mislaid in some provincial station.
> Or sent by mistake to an old address
> Whose new tenant put it in her dresser
> With the curlers and the hairspray forgetting
> To give it to the landlord to forward.

The poem's narrator, using the first-person and third-person plural pronouns "we" and "us" to corral readers into complicity, may be ignorant of the comic effect of his lament, but Gioia is not. He gives the poem's third part a piquancy shorn of fretfulness:

> And we still wait like children who have sent
> Two weeks' allowance far away
> To answer an enticing advertisement
> From a crumbling, yellow magazine,
> Watching through years as long as a childhood's summer,
> Checking the postbox with impatient faith
> Even on days when mail is never brought.

Those final seven lines capture the childlike expectations of the narrator and the readers as they wait for some sort of response. Gioia's "The Letter" *is* that response, that missing missive, the one we compose and send to ourselves in the absence of what we say we seek.

The last, relatively short poem in *Daily Horoscope* is "Sunday Night in Santa Rosa," consisting of a single, fourteen-line stanza of blank verse. To Greg Kuzma, "it seems almost a sonnet" ("Dana Gioia and the Poetry of Money" 119), while Jerome Mazzaro refers to it outright as "a blank-verse sonnet" ("Varieties of Poetic Experience" 156).[93] In *The Making of a Sonnet: A Norton Anthology*, editors Edward Hirsch and Eavan Boland include the poem in a chapter of twentieth-century sonnets containing this statement in its introduction: "The history of poetry is filled with the corpses of once popular forms. Yet the sonnet continues to fascinate us. It seems to suit the peculiarly human need for making forms, for singing and thinking, for engaging passion, for passionate argument, for talking to ourselves, to lovers, to other people" (182).

Despite its sonnet-like length, "Sunday Night in Santa Rosa" is, in fact, blank verse, which, by definition, lacks a rhyme scheme, the *sine qua non* for the most traditional sonnet forms: Shakespearean, Petrarchan, and Spenserian. But as Hirsch and Boland pointed out, "Throughout the twentieth century, poets continued to find and redefine the sonnet form" (181). Though it seems out of character for Gioia to fashion a sonnet expressly without rhyme, his penchant for experimentation and redefinition of form may have led to this blank-verse sonnet where two main organizing principles seem to hold sway: T.S. Eliot's objective correlative and Mikhail Bakhtain's literary concept of "carnival" in dialogic criticism. The first evokes emotion indirectly through a pattern of

[93] Adding muddle to this matter is the lead sentence in Andrew S. Hughes's article "Gioia Seeks to Change Poetry's Cultural Currency" in the February 11, 2001, Sunday Michigan edition of the *South Bend Tribune*: "Dana Gioia has never published a sonnet, but he's fought for the right of other poets to publish sonnets" (F6).

objects and events, while the second portrays demimonde life (so-called carnies, or those who live and work in a carnival) with grit sensuousness and humor.

The poem is literally about the end of a carnival sojourn where an inventory of objects is being disassembled, removed, or abandoned: "high tents," "the Wheel of Fortune," "the garbage by the popcorn stand," and "ticket stubs along the walk" (87). Carnival performers include "a drunken giant," "the juggler," "the Dog-Faced Boy" who "sneaks off to join the Serpent Lady for the night," "the Dead Man" who "loads his coffin on a truck," and, in the concluding two lines, "a clown" who "stares in a dressing mirror, / takes out a box, and peels away his face." Out of the glare of "the palaces of light" and out of sight of customers, the carnival strips off its gaudy veneer to reveal dissipation, detritus, an inner ache of emptiness, and other, unadorned humanity underneath. The last poem to appear in *Daily Horoscope,* "Sunday Night in Santa Rosa," like the carnival closing it depicts, signals the inevitable dispelling of illusion.

According to Thomas Swiss, "the best single poem in the book, 'The Room Upstairs,' is a dramatic monologue of great power and depth" (17). Also the longest single poem in *Daily Horoscope,* "The Room Upstairs" is an exemplar of New Formalism and Expansive Poetry's emphasis on renewed storytelling in verse that has too often been overlooked by critics of those two movements.

Written in blank verse, the poem is narrated by a college professor who is speaking to a prospective student renter of a room in his home. Such initial comments as "I never look in mirrors any more" and "I always thought the desert would outlive me" (81) gauge the age of the professor, who sometimes catches himself adrift in thought: "How did I get started on that subject? / I'm really not as morbid as I sound."

Soon those divergences increase as the professor recounts signal events and people in his life and occasionally dispenses hard-earned nuggets of wisdom to the prospective student renter: “Never look for what / You truly want. It comes too easily, / And then you never value it enough— / Until it’s gone” (82).

The professor’s recollection of a past student renter named David, “a clever, handsome boy / Who thought he was a poet,” lies at the heart of the narrative. “We were both / So full of dreams,” the professor wistfully recalls of David, who rented a room from him for nearly two years. The professor’s deep affection for David grows clearer over the course of the poem as he describes David’s passion for mountain climbing, his help with the rescue of a girl who froze in fear on a ledge, and the rope cuts he sustained to his face, hands, and torso—“It looked as if he had been branded” (83)—during that rescue.

Not long after graduation, David “went off to Europe where he wrote me / Mainly about beer halls and mountain trips. / I wrote that they would be the death of him.” That last sentence immediately proves prophetic in the revelation of the next two sentences: “That spring his mother phoned me when he fell. / I wonder if you know how strange it feels / When someone so much younger than you dies?”

The professor then tells the prospective student renter about a dream he had, in which David appeared like a specter “Waiting in the doorway, his arms outstretched” with skin “bruised, / Torn in places, crossed with deep red welts” and with veins “pushed up to the surface and spilled out.” This ghostly David also speaks briefly, providing the only other voice directly heard in the poem: “‘I’ve come back to you. / I’m cold. Just hold me. I’m so very cold’” (84). The many unflinching representations of Christ’s

crucified and resurrected body in visual art seep into the vivid description of the wraithlike David's wounds, deepening the sense of sacrifice and loss. This heightened spirituality is also symbolized by the room filling "with light, / Not blinding but the soft whiteness that you see / When the heavy snow is falling in the morning" (84) and by David growing "lighter, slipping silently away / Like snow between my fingers, and was gone." White light and snow are conventional metaphors for innocence or purity in poetry, but by twinning them inventively, Gioia invests each with a freshness ably skirting cliché.

The concluding, four-line stanza comes as a stark reminder that the poem ends as it began: without "the room upstairs" ever being seen by the prospective student renter. As the professor states, "That's all there is to say. I can't explain it, / And now I'm sorry to have bored you so. / It's getting late. You know the way upstairs. / But no, of course not. Let me show you to your room" (85). By the end of the poem, the reader has a more insightful and intuitive grasp of the professor's story than the professor does.

Consequently, to state, as Greg Kuzma does, that "there are some nice passages in 'The Room Upstairs'" (119) skims, if not entirely skips over, the brimming richness of the professor's desultory memories and remarks that in Gioia's carefully planned execution combine credible, demotic speech with an absorbing story. As Gioia explained to interviewer Robert Lance Snyder, "I needed to find a style at once flexible enough to tell a story but still capable of poetic force and lyric resonance" ("If Any Fire Endures beyond Its Flame: an Interview with Dana Gioia," September 22, 2006, www. thefreelibrary.com). In that, Gioia succeeded. As narrative verse, "The Room Upstairs" occupies a room at the top.

Written by Gioia "in memory of Robert Fitzgerald" (23), "Daily Horoscope" is a titular sequence of six poems in *Daily Horoscope* that can also stand alone: "1. Today Will Be . . . " in blank verse; "2. Nothing is Lost . . . " in blank verse, "3. Do Not Expect . . . " in blank verse, "4. Beware of Things in Duplicate . . . " in iambic tetrameter, "5. The Stars Now Rearrange Themselves . . . " moving between iambic tetrameter and pentameter, and "6. News Will Arrive from Far Away . . . " moving between iambic tetrameter and pentameter. Meant to govern an entire day, actual horoscopes in newspapers are usually a blend of astrological references or interpretations, alternately reassuring and alarming prognostications, vague, open-ended advice, and other imprecise language in which a wide diversity of readers can more readily project themselves. Similarly the "Daily Horoscope" sequence of six poems, "arranged meaningfully to suggest their affinities" (Gioia qtd. in Koss, "A Conversation with Dana Gioia" 68), traverses the course of a single day, from the moment of being awakened by an alarm clock in the morning to the moment of sleep later interrupted by the ring of a telephone in the dark.

To begin each poem and to echo its title, Gioia deliberately crafts some of the bland assertions and vacuous admonitions customarily encountered in a real horoscope: "Today will be like any other day" (25), "Nothing is lost. Nothing is so small / that it does not return" (26), "Do not expect that if your book falls open / to a certain page, that any phrase/ you read will make a difference today" (27), "Beware of things in duplicate" (28), "The stars now rearrange themselves above you / but to no effect" (29), and "News will arrive from far away" (30). The difference is that Gioia uses this diction and tone of

familiarity to draw his own readers into more intricate and deeply personal issues that a conventional daily horoscope tends to avoid.

Perhaps the most incisive analysis of "Daily Horoscope" comes from Robert McPhillips in his essay "Dana Gioia and Visionary Realism." In it McPhillips states that this titular six-poem sequence "reflects upon the complex, troubling interrelation between the imagination and reality" (*The New Formalism: A Critical Introduction* 42). He notes that the first poem, set in early morning, opens with an assurance of the day's ordinariness yet soon contradicts itself by listing what is "lost to you—the dreams, the sleep, / the faceless lovers you desire" (*Daily Horoscope* 25). In the second poem McPhillips points out that "the cost of living daily is that one must forgo fulfilling one's most extravagant desires" ("Dana Gioia and Visionary Realism" 42) and accept diminished but still important choices. For McPhillips the third poem, set in the afternoon, suggests that "genuine transcendence, though palpably present, remains out of reach" ("Dana Gioia and Visionary Realism" 43). Set in earliest evening, the fourth poem, "Beware of Things in Duplicate . . . ," "evokes the ominous eeriness that arises from such mundane doublings as the hands of a clock 'fixed on the same hour / you noticed at your morning coffee'" ("Dana Gioia and Visionary Realism" 43). And "the final two poems in 'Daily Horoscope'—set in the early evening and in the middle of the night—once again emphasize the tantalizing sense of the imminence—yet frustratingly elusive sense of transcendence—of the quotidian" ("Dana Gioia and Visionary Realism" 43).

If Robert McPhillips's examination of the "Daily Horoscope" six-poem sequence is fairly sure-handed from the outset, then Robert Richman's analysis is wholly wrong

footed in the opening paragraph of "Impatient Faith," his review of Gioia's book *Daily Horoscope* in the February 1987 issue of *The New Criterion*. Richman has taken Gioia's dedication of "Daily Horoscope" to his Harvard professor and friend Robert Fitzgerald as a signal that the "you" addressed in all six poems is, in fact, Robert Fitzgerald. According to Richman, "Gioia places his subject [Fitzgerald] amidst the 'unimportant' things in life, things 'not worth counting, not worth singling out'" and "Gioia then proceeds to restore Fitzgerald's uniqueness." (71). That seems preposterous, especially in light of the unbroken, profound admiration and affection expressed by Gioia for his former mentor in "Learning from Robert Fitzgerald," an essay he wrote twelve years after the publication of *Daily Horoscope.*

Instead, the "you" in "Daily Horoscope" nominally reflects the generic second-person address that is the *sine qua non* of a daily horoscope. Gioia's own permutational use of "you" in his six-poem sequence, particularly at the beginning, was inspired by Eugenio Montale's use of *tu* ("you") in *Ossi di seppia* ("Cuttlefish Bones"). For example, in Jonathan Galassi's translation of Montale's poem "In limine" ("On the Threshold") from *Ossi di seppia* are these lines: "If you move forward you may come upon / the phantom who will save you: / histories are shaped here, deeds / the endgame of the future will dismantle" and "Look for a flaw in the net that binds us / tight, burst through, break free!" (*Eugenio Montale, Collected Poems 1920-1954,* 5). As Galassi explains, "The story is being told to someone else, a 'you,' who, unlike the storyteller, may be able to take flight out of the constricting enclosure with the assistance of an intervening apparition, a creature out of a dream" (*Eugenio Montale, Collected Poems 1920-1954,* 415).

To his credit, Richman steps back from his farfetched Fitzgerald fixation in "Daily Horoscope" and onto analytic *terra firma* when he states: "Everyday reality exerts so great a pressure on us that at times it seems to be all there is to life, no matter how much we hunger for some access to the infinite. . . . Gioia decisively asserts that 'nothing is hidden in the obvious / changes of the world,' no matter how hard 'you press against / the surface of impenetrable things'" ("Impatient Faith" 71).

In his own interpretation of the last stanza—"And only briefly then / you touch, you see, you press against / the surface of impenetrable things"—in the third poem, "Do Not Expect . . . ," in Gioia's "Daily Horoscope," Robert McPhillips believes that

> we ultimately remain on the surface; within the limitations of the quotidian world we have no choice but to live in, transcendence into a more permanent realm of ideal love and beauty remains 'impenetrable.' But it remains imperative that we continue to 'press against them,' or life would indeed devolve into the 'waste land' of Eliot's early modernist vision. ("Dana Gioia and Visionary Realism" 48)

From his resolve that his poems not "provide answers. I want them to pose questions worth pondering," Gioia confirms that the "poetic sequence 'Daily Horoscope' presents contradictory points of view. The poem is a conversation—an argument in soliloquy. Virtually all of my poems proceed this way. I can't write more than a few lines without shifting the mood or arguing with myself. . . . Consciousness never moves in a straight line" (Snyder, "If Any Fire Endures beyond Its Flame: an Interview with Dana Gioia," September 22, 2006, www.thefreelibrary. com). He also concedes that "immanence and aletheia are motives in 'Daily Horoscope,'" adding that "those are among the issues that

the poem argues about." For Gioia, the sequence is about "a person overwhelmed by spiritual hungers and energy who doesn't yet know how to bring them into his life" (qtd. in Koss, "A Conversation with Dana Gioia" 68).

Throughout *Daily Horoscope* Gioia imbues human creations—a house, a photograph, a song, a radio, a garden—with immanent value and meaning because they indelibly touched people's lives in the past and can still affect them in the present. The same holds true of his "poems that present landscape with sacramental potential" (Brennan 29) through the interplay of light, weather, indigenous flora and fauna, and the memories they collectively engender. And the more direct poems about or told by characters meticulously invented by Gioia with just enough hint of enigma serve as reminders of all the lives and living captured within the breadth of his verse.

As Gioia affirmed, *Daily Horoscope* is partly propelled by a philosophical, spiritual, and literary tension between what is inherent or indwelling and what is disclosed or discoverable. To Gioia, what may stubbornly remain inaccessible is no reason to stop pressing "against the surface of impenetrable things." Or as the narrator in Robert Browning's dramatic monologue "Andrea del Sarto" memorably put it: "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what's a Heaven for?" (Browning, *Selected Poems* 395).

Chapter 5

CROWDED CLOSETS OF THE HEART

"Between grief and nothing I will take grief." — William Faulkner

Five years separate *Daily Horoscope* from *The Gods of Winter,* Dana Gioia's second volume of verse, published in 1991. On December 18, 1987, about a year after the publication of *Daily Horoscope*, his first-born son, Michael Jasper, died from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome at four months of age. "Losing him brutally clarified my life," Gioia admitted. "It made me recognize what mattered and what did not. I more or less stopped writing for a year" (qtd. in Brame, "Paradigms Lost: Part Two," www.danagioa.net/about/brame2.htm).

By the time he resumed writing, Gioia had already decided to embark on a different personal and vocational path, one outside of business that allowed him to concentrate on what he cherished most. "I proceeded slowly because I wasn't always sure what I wanted" (qtd. in Brame, "Paradigms Lost: Part Two," www.danagioa.net/about/brame2.htm). As for the effect his son's death had on writing verse, he said: "I became impatient with poems that could not bear a certain spiritual weight. . . . The reason we feel the overwhelming force of a particular moment is that our lives are finite. As Wallace Stevens said, 'Death is the mother of beauty.'"[94]

Critical reception to *The Gods of Winter* was largely favorable, led by the British Poetry Book Society's designation of the volume as its main autumn 1991 selection, an

[94] These six words come from the third line in part V of "Sunday Morning," a poem published by Wallace Stevens in 1923. The full sentence in the poem reads: "Death is the mother of all beauty; hence from her, / Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams / And our desires" (*Twentieth-Century American Poetry,* edited by Dana Gioia, David Mason, and Meg Schoerke with D. C. Stone 126).

honor altogether rare for a U.S. poet. In his review of the book, Robert McPhillips declared that Gioia "has already established himself as a poet with a permanent place in the canon of American poetry" (untitled review, *Verse,* Vol. 9, No. 2, summer 1992, 114). A review by Anne Stevenson noted that "his poems are limpid, mellifluous, quotable, and likely to be loved" (*Poetry Wales,* April 1992, 62) and that "almost every poem in *The Gods of Winter* fulfills the expectations raised by its form: a poetry of intuitive honesty that penetrates beyond appearances into possible aspects of 'truth'" (63). Thomas D'Evelyn's review is more emphatic: "Anyone who really wants to know the answer to the question, 'Can poetry matter?' will find that *The Gods of Winter* is full of answers" ("Poetry That Matters: A Plunge into Shared Experience" 14).

Amid the refrain of praise, a few reviewers demurred. In the highly regarded *Times Literary Supplement* Simon Carwell made the astonishing statement that "rhyme is not Gioia's strong suit" in *The Gods of Winter* and additionally criticized it as "relatively long on rhetoric, short on telling detail" ("Packaged Tours" 9). In *London Magazine* William Scammell cited "things to carp at, such as rhymes gone missing, the received nature of much of the diction and syntax," and "a tendency throughout the book to take themes and incidents from central casting" ("Word-Painting" 111). And an untitled review in the April 12, 1991, issue of *Publishers Weekly* includes a remark of tepid endorsement—"Gioia writes a few superb poems" (52)—and a prickly pan: "Gioia mars his collection with several self-promotional poems. 'My Confessional Sestina' . . . merely asserts his own priority by mimicking the form and the practitioners he purports to disavow."

In *Dana Gioia: A Critical Introduction* Matthew Brennan states that Gioia's *The Gods of Winter* "followed closely on . . . the brushfire he ignited in *The Atlantic Monthly* [sic]" (31), namely, "Can Poetry Matter?" in the May 1991 issue. "Coming in the wake of the controversial article," Brennan continues, "the new collection received scant attention in America compared to the widely noticed first book. *Daily Horoscope* drew more than two dozen reviews, most from prominent newspapers. . . . *The Gods of Winter* managed just eighteen reviews in America" (31-32). Perhaps only in the world of poetry would the difference between "more than two dozen" and "eighteen" reviews seem especially significant, and it is not cynical to suggest that Brennan's contention falls a little flat in light of how many major newspapers and other public media would be inclined to resurrect, not neglect, a recent literary controversy in the coverage of any new work. Nevertheless, Brennan has a valid point: It would be naïve to think that the feathers ruffled by "Can Poetry Matter?" were not still ruffled by the time *The Gods of Winter* came under reviewers' scrutiny that same year.

On a purely canonical footing, several poems in Gioia's impressive, five-part, second collection stand out, and two act almost as bookends: "Planting a Sequoia" (part I, p. 10) and "Becoming a Redwood" (part V, p. 55). A sequoia can grow more than 250 feet tall and 30 feet in diameter, and its life expectancy is about 3,000 years. A redwood can grow more than 375 feet tall and up to 24 feet in diameter, and its life expectancy is up to 2,000 years.[95] As a native Californian who has previously demonstrated his

[95] "General Sherman," a sequoia in Sequoia National Park, is currently the world's largest tree in volume: 275 feet in height, 102 feet in diameter, and 2.7 million pounds in weight. It is also the largest living organism on Earth. "Hyperion," a redwood in Redwood National and State Parks, is currently the world's tallest known tree: nearly 380 feet in height, more than 15 feet in diameter, and 1.6 million pounds in weight. See www.livescience.com/39461-sequoias-redwood-trees.html for general information on both species of trees.

knowledge of the state's flora (for example, "California Hills in August" in *Daily Horoscope*), Gioia clearly knows the difference between those two species of trees. So it is no accident why he chose the more enduring one as a focal point for "Planting a Sequoia," a free-verse poem describing a private, family ceremony in honor of Michael Jasper Gioia, his deceased son.

Besides, "everything in the poem is true," Gioia says of "Planting a Sequoia" (qtd. in Koss, "A Conversation with Dana Gioia" 69). It is a rare, overtly autobiographical admission of poetic influence by Gioia, who also admitted that he carried the poem "around in my head for months before I had the strength to write it down." A venerated Sicilian ritual of planting an olive or fig tree in celebration of a first son's birth is altered to a ritual of planting "our native giant. / Defying the practical custom of our fathers, / Wrapping in your roots a lock of hair, a piece of an infant's birth cord" (10), in commemoration of a first son's death. With the aid of his two brothers,[96] Dana plants "A slender shoot against the sunset" in his parents' northern California orchard not far from the coast, and the ultimate purpose and catharsis become clear in the last stanza:

> And when our family is no more, all of his unborn brothers dead,
>
> Every niece and nephew scattered, the house torn down,
>
> His mother's beauty ashes in the air,

[96] The actual planting of the sequoia took place on Christmas Day in 1987. In addition to his brothers Ted and Gregory, Dana's sister, Cara, was present at the planting. Dana's explanation of why he omitted Christmas Day and his sister from the poem offers an insight into his compositional commitment to optimal effect: "To include that particular holiday seemed too much symbolism for a poem already so burdened with emotion. My sister was around, but it seemed clearer to focus on the men since the original custom of planting a tree . . . was a father's task" (qtd. in Koss, "A Conversation with Dana Gioia" 69). The exclusion of Cara, then, was motivated not by sexism or lack of sibling affection but by purely narrative and other poetic concerns, and neither omission undercuts the poem's veracity. As Dana further explained, "I left certain things out, but poetry requires excluding some details to allow the important things to emerge more clearly."

> I want you to stand among strangers, all young and ephemeral to you,
> Silently keeping the secret of your birth. (10)

With its references to "today we kneel in the cold" and its offerings of labor, soil, water, and "Nights scented with ocean fog, days softened by the circuit of bees," the poem creates a kind of arboreal church in which Gioia and his brothers quietly pray by digging on their knees. The greatest loss to any parent is the death of a child, and deepening that loss is the realization that the parent will outlive the child. It is a devastating blow, a sudden disruption of the natural order, and a cruel distortion of the way life is expected to unfold. Gioia defies that disorder by commingling parts of Michael Jasper's hair and umbilical with the roots of the one tree that will far outlive everyone there and carry forward his first-born's memory. By 2012, the year "A Conversation with Dana Gioia" appeared in *Image* quarterly, the sequoia was "over sixty feet high" and "perfectly proportioned. My father tended to it till the day he died,[97] and it reflects that care" (qtd. in Koss 69). The reason for that tree in that place is likely to be passed down generationally within Dana Gioia's own family "tree." It is a living heirloom designed not to tarnish or disappear for millennia. In a nod toward *ars longa, vita brevis,* the poem itself promises to have staying power of its own.

"Becoming a Redwood," the other arboreal bookend, is *vers libre* comprising nine tercets with a patina of blank verse. In her book *Dana Gioia* April Lindner reprints the poem in its entirety and then offers this mostly elucidative analysis:

> The speaker imagines what it would be like to become part of his surroundings. By standing still, he tries to approximate the experience of a

[97] Michael Gioia, Dana's father, nurtured the tree from December 25, 1987, until October 30, 2001, the date of his death—a total of thirteen years.

> tree. . . . The act of imitation eventually yields an understanding of the grass's pain and the timelessness of the redwoods. Coming when it does [halfway in the poem], the word "unimaginable" is startling, since the speaker has succeeded in imagining himself so thoroughly into vegetative life that he can stand fearless among the hunting coyotes and feral dogs. As is the case in "Daily Horoscope," close attention to seemingly insignificant details of the natural world enables a spiritual breakthrough. (45-46)

Where Lindner errs is in her assumption that those details are "seemingly insignificant" to the poem's speaker and perhaps to Gioia himself. Those details, in fact, stir an awareness of immanence and aletheia previously found in the six-poem sequence "Daily Horoscope." In his discussion of "Becoming a Redwood," Robert McPhillips displays a surer grasp of those concepts: the poem "can be seen as connecting the middle-aged poet with the son he buried in 'Planting a Sequoia,' flourishing in a landscape where 'Coyotes hunt / these hills and packs of feral dogs.' . . . California increasingly becomes for Gioia a *paysage morale*[98] of stoic endurance in the face of life's inescapable 'danger'" (*The New Formalism: A Critical Introduction* 54).

Another deft poetic touch by Gioia can be glimpsed in the poem's last line, "there is no silence but when danger comes" (56), a fitting bookend to how the poem begins: "Stand in a field long enough, and the sounds / start up again" (55), including those from crickets, a toad, steers snorting, and an old windmill creaking, which "merge into the single voice of a summer hill." Describing auditory sensations in a poem can be more

[98] In English, "moral landscape."

difficult than describing visual sensations, yet Gioia delivers both with aplomb. That summer hill is alive with sounds until an intruder walks in, and the only way an intruder can make amends for the intrusion and restore those sounds is by remaining silent and stock still and maintaining "watchfulness," like a redwood "rooted for centuries, the living wood grown tall / and thickened with a hundred thousand days of light." That reference to multi-millennial "light" echoes the "western light" bathing the orchard corner where roots of a sequoia and vestiges of Michael Jasper Gioia are joined in "Planting a Sequoia."

With the exception of "Night Watch," the other poems in part I of *The Gods of Winter* seem cast in the lengthy shadow of Michal Jasper Gioia's premature death. The acute pain felt by Gioia over his son's untimely passing, however, never swamps the spare poignancy and subtle power he brings to that verse. Sentiment, not sentimentality, pulses through it.

"Prayer," the opening free-verse poem comprising five tercets followed by one stand-alone line, adopts the plaintive, if insistent, tone of a supplicant. After addressing "Seducer, healer, deity or thief" (3), all earthbound labels for the varied, speculated dispositions for God or a god, the poem's narrator becomes profoundly personal: "I pray watch over him / as a mountain guards its covert ore / and the harsh falcon its flightless young." The parental similes of an immovable, impregnable "mountain" and a "harsh falcon" convey both a massive resistance and a ferocious vigilance in the defense of their dearest possessions. And the dearest possession for the poem's narrator is "him," the departed son. It is one father asking perhaps the Father to protect his son as if he were His own. The narrator's faith in a power greater than himself is expressed in the line "I will

see you soon enough" and is most keenly felt in the fidelity he has for his son that does not terminate in death.

All Souls' Day, traditionally observed on November 2 in Catholic and several other Christian denominations, is reserved for praying for the souls of the faithful departed and their eternal, peaceful repose in the afterlife. In his poem "All Souls'," comprising six iambic pentameter quatrains where every second and fourth line rhyme uniquely in each, Gioia seizes on this religious occasion to wonder what would happen if "there is no heaven and no hell, / And that the dead can never leave the earth" but instead "Each finds a world it cannot touch or hear" (4). April Lindner ascribes to Gioia's poem the idea that

> if death robs us of all individuality, perhaps the souls of the newly dead are most saddened by their inability to appreciate the particulars of the natural world . . . . If the hypothetical ghosts in "All Souls''' despair over their lost ability to take sensual joy from nature, one loss is even greater: their lost ability to have an effect on the world. To live in nature and yet to be unable to touch or be touched by it is a kind of limbo. (*Dana Gioia* 43)

The absence of physical senses and sensations is the burden borne by these bodiless souls unable to take final celestial flight: "They are silent as a rising mist, / A smudge of smoke dissolving in the air. / They watch the shadows lengthen on the grass. / The pallor of the rose is their despair" (4). These souls are imprisoned within a physical world ever eluding them, and Gioia's vivid use of simile ("as a rising mist") and other metaphorical or symbolic images ("A smudge of smoke," "The pallor of the rose") intensifies their deracination and evanescence. Yet somehow, within the grim picture he

paints, Gioia's fear for his son's hypothetical afterlife, still tethered to earth, hints at a tacit, equal hope that such heavy restrictions are themselves hypothetical and thus not "real."

Featuring six five-line stanzas and a final, stand-alone line that are all composed in irregular stress verse, "Night Watch" carries this dedication: "*For my uncle, Theodore Ortiz, U.S.M.M.*" (5). Integrating some elements of genuine biography, it is an elegiac imagining by Gioia of what may have been his beloved, deceased uncle's last voyage. An ideal companion piece for this very moving poem is "'Lonely Impulse of Delight': One Reader's Childhood," Gioia's essay and later book about the fulfillment and refuge that reading provided him in his family's Hawthorne apartment where his uncle Ted's great collection of books and recordings became Dana's personal library. "Night Watch" includes some of Dana's finest verse writing, such as the alliterative "swirling in a star-soaked sea" and the provocative "endless argument of waves" (5-6). His deep empathy for his uncle is apparent throughout the poem, from its first two lines, "I think of you standing on the sloping deck / as the freighter pulls away from the coast of China," to the last stanza and last line:

> Breathe in that dark and tangible air, for in a few weeks
> You will be dead, burned beyond recognition,
> left as a headstone in the unfamiliar earth
> with no one to ask, neither wife nor children,
> why your thin ashes have been buried here
>
> and not scattered on the shifting gray Pacific. (6)

"News from Nineteen Eighty-Four" consists of four, nine-line, iambic pentameter stanzas couched in Gioia's inventive tweaking of "Newspeak" from George Orwell's 1949 novel, *1984*, and includes the novel's own term of "Ministry"[99] as well as Gioia's *1984*-redolent terms "Spring Youth Festival," "Worker's Festival," "Freedom Square," "Leader," and "People" (28-29). The brilliance of Gioia's writing in this poem is how intentionally affectless and interchangeable the "news" is through repetition, through the importation of the novel's penchant for frequently passive verbs ending in "-ed" ("is now expected," "will be delayed," "have been raised," "have been surpassed"), through incremental qualification (from "The great offensive in the East began / this morning as our forces overran / the enemy's positions" to "The enemy's offensive in the East / has been repulsed at great cost," and from "Morale among the volunteers is high" to "morale / among the senior volunteers is high"), and through exaggerated, relentlessly cheerleading language of the state ("Total victory," "massive victory," "record figures of the summer harvest").

Gioia's scribal skill is also detectable in often contradictory statements. For example, the sentence "The Spring / Youth Festival will be delayed by an / impromptu demonstration of support" in the first stanza is an advance announcement of something that is supposed to happen spontaneously, that is, unplanned or unscheduled. Another example is a third-stanza sentence, "the execution / of draft evaders will resume tonight / in Freedom Square," in which "execution" and "Freedom" are linked. Still another

[99] Orwell's *1984* features "the Ministry of Truth, which concerned itself with news, entertainment, education, and the fine arts; the Ministry of Peace, which concerned itself with war; the Ministry of Love, which maintained law and order; and the Ministry of Plenty, which was responsible for economic affairs"(4). The "Ministry" in Gioia's poem artfully integrates aspects of all four Orwellian "Ministries," whose news is disseminated in the novel by "the Ministry of Truth—Minitrue, in Newspeak" (3).

example is this sentence in the last stanza: "The Worker's Festival began last night / with execution of trade dissidents," which calls up questions about how a putative worker's festival can start with the slaughter of workers who dissent on trade, an issue of economic importance to the proletariat. This glacial roteness contributes to the anesthetic effect on the implied audience within the poem and on those reading it. "News from Nineteen Eighty-Four" would doubtlessly have brought an approving smile to Orwell's face.

No fewer than three of the poems in *The Gods of Winter* are about poetry or poets: "The Silence of the Poets," "My Confessional Sestina," and "The Next Poem." The latter two constitute an *ars poetica,* defined by poet Edward Hirsch as "a poem that takes the art of poetry—its own means of expression—as its explicit subject. It proposes an aesthetic. Self-referential, uniquely conscious of itself as both a performance and a treatise, the great *ars poetica* embodies what it is about. It enacts its subject" (*A Poet's Glossary* 40).

Matthew Brennan singles out "The Next Poem" as "the best of the trio" and calls it indisputably *ars poetica* (*Dana Gioia: A Critical Introduction* 39), and so does Robert McPhillips (untitled review, *Verse,* Vol. 9, No. 2, 114). The poem comprises eight iambic tetrameter quatrains, each with rhyming second and fourth lines. The irony is that it is a highly polished, finished poem about an unfinished poem: "How much better it seems now / than when it is finally done" (34), a line emphasizing that "what is realized . . . is always inferior to what can be imagined" (McPhillips, *The New Formalism* 56). Gioia has a lot of fun with using precision to characterize imprecision in verse: "While gradually the form appears / as each line is coaxed aloud— / the architecture of a room / seen from the middle of a crowd." He also vents some of his poetic pet peeves: "No

jumble box of imagery / dumped glumly in the reader's lap / or elegantly packaged junk / the unsuspecting must unwrap" as well as "And the real subject left unspoken / but unmistakable to those / who don't expect a jungle parrot / in the black and white of prose." And Gioia's "The music that of common speech / but slanted" (34) is a subtle evocation and ratification of Emily Dickinson's poem beginning "Tell all the truth but tell it slant—" (*The Poems of Emily Dickinson* 494), a poem often construed as her guidelines for making verse effective. Essentially "The Next Poem" is Gioia's agile argument for undumbed-down verse.

"My Confessional Sestina," a sestina in free verse, deserves the *ars poetica* imprimatur as well. "A sestina which satirizes sestinas" (qtd. in Brame, "Paradigms Lost: Part 2"), the poem contains the form's prescribed thirty-nine lines divided into six six-line stanzas and a three-line envoi. Gioia mostly adheres to the established, intricate patterns of a sestina, "widely acknowledged to be one of the most complicated of verse forms" (Murfin and Ray 442). But true to his compositional nature, he slightly alters repeated end-words: "sestinas" becomes "sestina" in the third and fourth stanzas and in the envoi; "magazines" becomes "magazine" in the second and fourth stanzas and in the envoi; "students" becomes "student" in the second and fourth stanzas; "workshops" becomes "workshop" in the second and fourth stanzas; "contributors" becomes "contributor" in the fourth stanza; and "taste" becomes "tasteful" in the middle of the envoi's second line.

Form serves content in "My Confessional Sestina," where the poem's narrator ("I") confesses how "sick" he or she is "of these sestinas / written by youngsters in poetry workshops"—also dubbed by Gioia as students' "boot-camp sestinas"—and how "a

passable sestina / isn't very hard to write" (31). The proof, of course, is Gioia's apparently painless mastery of that form in this poem. A witty, often wicked *cri de coeur* from Gioia, the poem punctures self-inflated versification exercises that "build technique rather than taste" in students "who care less about being poets than contributors." Gioia's "My Confessional Sestina"[100] is a provocative poetic precursor to the prose argument he raised about university writing programs in his May 1991 *Atlantic* essay, "Can Poetry Matter?"

The third poem about poetry or poets in *The Gods of Winter* is "The Silence of the Poets." Consisting of three five-line stanzas and one seven-line stanza of free verse, it posits a nearly post-literary, post-apocalyptic scenario in which "Once there were so many books, so many poets. / All the masterpieces one could never read, / indistinguishable even then / among the endless shelves of the unreadable" (30). The best poets ceased to write, and "no one noted when or why. A few observers voiced their mild regret / about another picturesque, unprofitable craft / that progress had irrevocably doomed." Still surviving were "music, art, and film, / diversions enough for a busy people. / And even poetry for those who want it." As for the old books shunted into dusty disuse, "a few old men may visit from time to time / to run their hands across the spines / and reminisce, / but no one ever comes to read / or would know how." In the title essay of his 2004 book, *Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture*, Gioia asks, "What will be the poet's place in a society that has increasingly little use for books, little time for serious culture, little knowledge of the past, little consensus on literary value, and—even among intellectuals—little faith in poetry itself?" (5). In "The Silence of the Poets,"

[100] "My Confessional Sestina" was first published in the October 1983 issue of *Poetry*.

predating *Disappearing Ink* by eighteen years,[101] Gioia gives his answer or, at least, one possible answer.

As a payoff in lexically diverse and diverting verse, "Money" is hardly petty cash. Taking its cue from Wallace Stevens's well-known aphorism "Money is a kind of poetry,"[102] Gioia's free-verse poem of six tercets amusingly explores its topic with thesaurus-like relish:

> Money, the long green,
> cash, stash, rhino, jack
> or just plain dough.
>
> Chock it up, fork it over,
> shell it out. Watch it
> burn holes through pockets.
>
> To be made of it! To have it
> to burn! Greenbacks, double eagles,
> megabucks and Ginnie Maes.

[101] "The Silence of the Poets" was first published in the winter 1986 issue of *Southwest Review*.

[102] The quote comes from Wallace Stevens's "Adagia" in *Opus Posthumous*, a miscellany of poems, plays, and prose originally published in 1957. See p. 191 in *Opus Posthumous*, a 1989 Vintage paperback in which the original text has been revised, enlarged, corrected, and edited by Milton J. Bates. In response to Stevens's quote, Kay Ryan wrote "Poetry Is a Kind of Money," a 14-line, free-verse poem in *Flamingo Watching*, her 1994 collection of verse. That book was Dana Gioia's introduction to her work and became the main impulse behind his essay "Discovering Kay Ryan" in the winter 1998-99 issue of *The Dark Horse*.

It greases the palm, feathers a nest,

holds heads above water,

makes both ends meet.

Money breeds money.

Gathering interest, compounding daily.

Always in circulation.

Money. You don't know where it's been,

but you put it where your mouth is.

And it talks. (33)

Each of the poem's six tercets covers a distinct aspect of money: slang words, popular colloquialisms, and other synonyms for it (first tercet); how it is used or spent (second tercet); those who have it in abundance (third tercet); what it can do (fourth tercet); how it "breeds" itself, grows, and spreads (fifth tercet); and how ignorance of its origins or distant prior possessors does not affect the ability to "put it where your mouth is," that is, to lend ultimate seriousness and confidence to what is spoken, leading to the overall idea that money "talks" and nonsense walks (sixth tercet).

Also, the improbable, herculean, and anthropomorphic properties of money—"To be made of it!" and "It . . . makes both ends meet" "And it talks"—vie with "cash, stash, rhino, jack" and what could have easily become a much longer chain of alternate terms. Perhaps Gioia, accused of being a poet of pelf, is having fun by making fun of that point of view through copious, cleverly combined clichés and other money-mischief language

almost begging for critical attack. But more likely he simply enjoyed weaving that merry mazuma skein for its own sake. "Genuine wit is rare in contemporary poetry but rarer still combined with brevity," Gioia noted about Kay Ryan's verse ("Discovering Kay Ryan," *Disappearing Ink* 135). The same could be said of his "Money."[103]

The longest single poem in Gioia's first volume of verse, *Daily Horoscope*, is "The Room Upstairs" (81-85), telling a powerful story, and *The Gods of Winter* features two longer and even more accomplished narrative poems, "Counting the Children" (13-19) and "The Homecoming" (39-52). Those two poems "give extraordinary weight to a volume which might otherwise concede too much to peaceable iambs," states Anne Stevenson who, in lauding the two long poems by Gioia, tacks on a perplexing opinion about the dominant metrical foot employed by him in *The Gods of Winter* (untitled review, *Poetry Wales* 62).

In his review of the book, Christopher Clausen singles out "Counting the Children" as "the most powerful poem in the volume" ("Poetry Formal and Free," *The Sewanee Review* xcviii), and Thomas D'Evelyn goes one step further in his praise: "Ambitious and many-sided, it may be Gioia's best poem yet" ("Poetry That Matters: A Plunge into Shared Experience," *The Christian Science Monitor* 14). By any reckoning, "Counting the Children" is brilliantly conceived and executed as verse that reveals an engrossing story.

The poem comprises 166 lines clustered in 55 iambic pentameter tercets and a final stand-alone line, and, apart from the last line, functions as unrhymed *terza rima*,

[103] Interestingly, Gioia's "Money," with its Wallace Stevens's epigraph, first appeared in the fall 1990 issue of *The Wallace Stevens Journal.*

which traditionally features an interlocking rhyme scheme (aba, bcb, cdc, ded, *et cetera*). Credited with the creation of *terza rima* was Dante Alighieri, who used it in his *Divine Comedy*. That echo of Dante's masterpiece in "Counting the Children" is not limited to form. Dante's indelible impression of perdition reverberates in this chilling statement spoken in the poem's sixth tercet: "'Come in,' she said. 'I want to show you hell.'" (13).

Gioia wastes no time in setting the scene for the "hell" found in his poem: "'This must have been her bedroom, Mr. Choi. / It's hard to tell. The only other time / I came back here was when I found her body'" (13). In that opening tercet Gioia limns two characters, only one of whom has explicit dialogue: the unnamed next-door neighbor of the dead woman. The other, main character is Mr. Choi, a Chinese-American accountant "sent out by the State / To take an inventory of the house." Choi, the first-person narrator and "voice" of the poem, explains that "when someone wealthy dies without a will, / The court sends me to audit the estate." The next-door neighbor gives him the basic information about the deceased: "'She used to wander around town at night / And rifle through the trash. We all knew that. / But what we didn't know about was *them*.'" She leads him to a room where "A crowd of faces looked up silently. / Shoulder to shoulder, standing all in rows, / Hundreds of dolls were lining every wall." The description gets grimmer:

> Some battered, others missing arms and legs,
> Shelf after shelf of the same dusty stare
> As if despair could be assuaged by order.
>
> They looked like sisters huddling in the dark,

> Forgotten brides abandoned at the altar,
>
> Their veils turned yellow, dresses stiff and soiled.

Those last two lines summon an image of Miss Havisham, Charles Dickens's strikingly drawn, aging "bride" in *Great Expectations* who was abandoned at the altar and wore her faded wedding dress for the rest of her days amid decay.

Later Choi recounts a dream, influenced by his encounter with the dolls, where he works in a panic on finishing a ledger he believes crucial to the survival of his own daughter: "But I had lost too many of the numbers. / They tumbled to the floor and blazed on fire. / I saw the dolls then—screaming in the flames" (16). After awakening in a sweat in his own bed and quietly padding down a dark hall to visit his daughter's bedroom where a night light shone from inside the door, he recalls the many occasions when he would "creep into that room to watch her sleep . . . Always afraid of what I might discover" and how he "felt so helpless standing by her crib, / Watching the quiet motions of her breath." The next tercet amplifies those paternal feelings: "How delicate this vessel in our care, / This gentle soul we summoned to the world, / A life we treasured but could not protect" (16-17). As Robert McPhillips observes,

> Although some critics believe that it ["Counting the Children"] was written in direct response to the death of Gioia's son, the poem had been composed before then; it was, however, substantially revised and expanded after December 1987. While the personal loss is not addressed directly, its influence on the poem is clear. (*The New Formalism* 51)

Toward the end of the poem, Choi poses some philosophical questions bred of the love for his daughter that ultimately extends to all children: "What if completion comes

only in beginnings?" and "What if we cannot read the future / Because our destiny moves back in time, / And only memory speaks prophetically?" Choi prefaces those questions with this realization: "Each spirit, be it infant, bird or flower, / Comes to the world perfected and complete, / And only time proves its unraveling" (18). Visiting the bedroom of his now seven-year-old sleeping daughter, he sees her three dolls sitting side by side on a bookshelf.

> Their sharp eyes surveyed me with contempt.
> They recognized me only as a rival,
> The one whose world would keep no place for them.
>
> I felt like holding them tight in my arms,
> Promising I would never let them go,
> But they would trust no promises of mine.
>
> I feared that if I touched one, it would scream. (19)

The dolls salvaged from street trash by the deceased woman are obvious proxies for the children she may not have had (no family members appear in the poem) and, by extension, for all children once their childhoods are outlived or, in a defining sense, discarded. "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things" is a biblical quotation most applicable to the poem (*Life Application Bible: New King James Version,* 1 Cor. 13:11, 2110).

The earlier vision of the dolls "screaming in the flames" (16) in Choi's dream returns in the poem's last, lone line, sitting like an orphan: "I feared that if I touched one, it would scream." It is a confession and parting prayer, a father's eternally hopeful but inescapably hindered intent to safeguard his child from harm and especially death. All parents want that, and all children expect it. Not enough get their wish.

More disturbing than "Counting the Children" in *The Gods of Winter* is "The Homecoming," not only the longest poem in the book but also the longest poem ever written by Gioia. Consisting of 409 lines of blank verse, this dramatic monologue "took years to finish," admitted Gioia, adding that

> I could not have worked on "The Homecoming" for so long had it not dealt with actions of mortal consequence. Why is "The Homecoming" so violent? There was no other way to tell that story truthfully. It is a poem about the power of evil. Violence has become an unavoidable subject for American poets. Too much contemporary poetry is platitudinous, full of blandly uplifting and usually self-congratulatory sentiments. We need darker, more dangerous poetry—not sensational but willing to probe uncomfortable areas. (qtd. in Brame, "Paradigms Lost: Part 2")

No one would dispute "The Homecoming" as "darker, more dangerous" verse both in content and in presentation. The poem's narrator is a murderer who begins his tale at the end: "I watched your headlights coming up the drive / and thought, 'Thank God, it's over'" (9). He waits for the police to arrive following a number of murders he committed after escaping prison: "I won't resist. I'm ready to go back. / Tomorrow you'll be heroes in the paper— / KILLER NABBED AT FOSTER MOTHER'S HOME."

According to Anne Stevenson, "the psychological insight that plays through 'The Homecoming' . . . seems a triumph of descriptive narrative" (untitled review, *Poetry Wales* 62), and that it is. Twenty years have passed since the poem's narrator last stayed in the house where he was raised by a foster mother who "wasn't family. / I don't know how she got first custody, / except that no one really wanted me. / My father disappeared when I was three. / I don't remember him. Then the next year / my mother took off, too" (40). His foster mother was a religious martinet who believed strongly in both the rod and the rood. At age twelve the narrator skipped church and Sunday school to visit the state fair, where by chance he saw his biological mother who "smiled and winked at me, . . . a smile / without the slightest trace of recognition." When he returned home, "the old bitch paddled me that night / for missing church" (41).

This corporal punishment often supplemented harsh instructions about "how everyone / would go either to Heaven or to Hell. / God knew it all, and nothing you could do / would make a difference. . . . She asked me suddenly—for the first time— / if I were saved. I couldn't give an answer." The desolation descending on the narrator, still just a boy, is felt acutely in this stanza:

> That night I knew that I would go to Hell,
> and it would be a place just like my room—
> dark, suffocating, with its door shut tight,
> and even if my mother were there too,
> she wouldn't find me. I would always be alone. (42)

He runs away, and in a dark cornfield he trips and falls "into some kind of a hole" in which "each time I tried / to right myself I slipped and fell again." The image of a deep

or bottomless pit thwarting escape is hardly new in literature, nor is the appearance of a crow, deemed an omen or symbol of awaiting death, but Gioia uses both familiar tropes in fresh ways to test the mettle of the narrator in confronting fear. After standing up and startling the crow into flying away, the narrator has an epiphany: "I realized how many of the things I feared in life / were likely just as much afraid of me. I knew I could climb out then, and I did. . . . I'd never be afraid again" (43). The narrator has learned how to regard fear as an ally, not a handicap. It is not surprising why soon thereafter he "started getting into trouble. / My teachers always wondered why a kid / as smart as me would lie so shamelessly / or pick a fight for no apparent reason. / She wondered, too,—as if intelligence / was ever any guarantee of goodness." The "she" is his foster mother.

He starts to steal and develops a disposition of increasing intolerance, arrogance, and hostility: "I realized / how power was the only thing that mattered" (44) and "I knew knowledge gives a person power" (45). Soon he "was born again, / not out of death, but into it. . . . If I could only become strong enough, / I could do anything. I only had to throw away the comfortable lies, / the soft morality" (46). He draws new strength from his audacity: slitting the throat of a neighbor's dog, filling the carcass with rocks, and hurling it down a well, and then killing a cat and another dog in the neighborhood. His thievery grows frequenter and bolder, and his attitude toward his foster mother takes on a darker cast: "I'd come home late at night, and there she'd be / staring at me, so pious, old, and ugly."

Eventually, armed with a gun, he is arrested and serves seven years in prison where, he says, "Madness makes storytellers of us all" (47). In his cell he devises a game

> called Roommates. I'd catch

a horse-fly or a cockroach in a jar—

that would be roommate number one—and then

I'd look behind the toilet for a spider.

I'd drop him in the jar and see what happened.

I liked to watch the roommates get acquainted.

Know what I learned? That spiders always win. (48)

The narrator's slide into evil is incremental at first but soon becomes a self-feeding freefall. He escapes from prison but not before killing a guard, and heads directly for the house he knew. Eventually he hitches a ride with a woman who "said I looked / just like her son in Tulsa. She talked a lot. / There's always someone stupider than you" (49). He kills her, ditches her car, and in the dark walks "the six miles home. I knew the way."

Gioia manages to build tension even after the reader realizes what will happen to the foster mother when the narrator finally arrives at her house. The mystery resides less in the final horrific act—yet another grisly murder—than in how Gioia will effect it.

At the house the narrator has some misgivings: "How pointless my revenge seemed standing there. / Nothing I did would bring my childhood back. . . . I had no right to come and stand in judgment" (50). But when she tells him, "I have another boy who lives here now," he unobtrusively enters the extra bedroom and finds "a scrawny kid with short red hair, / not more than twelve." It is the same age when the narrator was spurned by his biological mother at the state fair and when he first ran away. Giving the boy the cash he took from the murdered prison guard, the narrator tells the frightened boy to "leave me alone with her. Take this and walk to town" (51).

After the boy leaves, the narrator, evidently unburdened by his prior qualms, fulfills his original mission. As his foster mother labors at the kitchen sink, he "came up behind her all at once. / Then it was over—over just like that." He feels "delight, / a happiness that went beyond my body. . . . I had been strong enough. And I was free." But soon the adrenaline wears off, "the phoney high / that violence unleashes in your blood" (52). Glancing down at her corpse, he "knew that we would always be together. / All I could do was wait for the police. / I had come home, and there was no escape."

For Robert McPhillips, "the most interesting moments of this poem involve the narrator's mystical rebirth into evil. . . . He has attained his negative transcendence and is content to return to prison and live off its memory" (*The New Formalism* 53-54). But the poem offers more than that. For in plumbing the depths of this homicidal narrator's psyche, it reveals a barless, wall-less prison systemically created by abandonment, neglect, abuse, alienation, dejection, anger, revenge, and, at root, an ineradicable feeling of being unloved. It is an interior prison from which ultimate escape proves impossible for the narrator. That is not contentment. That is fatalism sown by despondency.

Written in unrhymed iambic tetrameter, "Maze without a Minotaur" is told in the first-person plural, "we," making its speakers the collective voice and consciousness of all who read the poem. Based on the Greek myth of the minotaur (a cannibalistic creature who was half-bull and half-man) placed in a maze, or labyrinth, constructed with so many twists, turns, and dark dead-ends that no one in it could escape, the poem "imagines the human psyche as a cramped and dirty house" (Lindner, *Dana Gioia* 40). It contains the hidden recesses of memories and vestiges of desultory lives without any egress except death. Here, in a "dark maze without a minotaur," are "no monsters but ourselves" (57).

The maze resists comprehension, but "If we could only push these walls / apart, unfold the room the way / a child might take apart a box / and lay it flat upon the floor—," then "we" might be able to understand the monsters "we" placed inside. "Yet who / could bear to see it all?" They would be items saved or stored but inevitably aging, fading, withering, crumbling, or curdling: "The slow / descending spirals of the dust / against the spotted windowpane, / the sunlight on the yellow lace, / the hoarded wine turned dark and sour, / the photographs, the letters—all / the crowded closets of the heart."

That description leads to the last stanza where curiosity yields to an impulse to destroy, to "cry / for fire to break out on the stairs / and raze each suffocating room." Yet the maze remains impervious, and "we / can only pray that if these rooms / have memories, they are not ours."

The poem "Maze without a Minotaur" delivers a unique variant of a familiar, cautionary message: Be careful of what you seek, for you may find it. Not all self-knowledge leads to wisdom, freedom, or reform. In that sense the poem's depiction of the labyrinthine human psyche and the memories secluded within it is "not far from the interior prison in which the sociopathic narrator of 'The Homecoming' finds himself" (Lindner, *Dana Gioia* 41). One way or another, we all keep and carry "crowded closets of the heart."

Chapter 6

ALL THE AIRY WORDS WE SUMMON

"You compose first, then you listen for the reverberation." – James Fenton

"I will revise a poem fifty to a hundred times trying to get it exactly right," Gioia said. "Some people consider that behavior neurotic" (qtd. in Brame, "Paradigms Lost: Part Two," www.danagioa.net/about/brame2.htm). Neurotic or not, it shows how meticulously he composes verse. And no poem in his third collection, *Interrogations at Noon,* published a decade after *The Gods of Winter*, is more emblematic of that care than "The Litany." It is poem of allusive beauty and depth meriting close inspection.

In response to my gentle request, Gioia on October 18, 2009, mailed to me his sketches and working drafts of this poem written in *vers libre* modulating in and out of blank verse. They provide a rare glimpse into the usually solitary gestation of poetry by a living writer, and they also reveal the *modus operandi* Gioia applies to most of his verse composition.

He writes mainly by longhand with periodic turns at typescript to allow changes to congeal and be scrutinized in printed form, and he always says the poem aloud at each successive stage to ensure he can hear it both as music and as speech. Gioia also informed me that he saves his sketches and drafts because he likes to return to earlier ones occasionally to reconsider abandoned lines or phrases for the poem then under construction or for new work.

For "The Litany" he also perused at one point some random jottings of lines and phrases from 1978 or 1979 that included these two lines: "water sifting through the soil purifying itself / gathering in basins, wells, deep rock springs." They clearly inspired

these two lines in the published second stanza of "The Litany": "sifting through rock, pooling in darkness, / gathering in springs, then rising without our agency" (10). Also among Gioia's jottings is the line "dust, the dust of roads, of unattended rooms" that became "to the dust of roads and vacant rooms" in the published fourth stanza of "The Litany" (10). And in an undated, very early or perhaps initial sketch appears this five-line stanza:

> This is the litany of the lost things
> of the yellow breadbasket with sunflowers
> of pogo sticks and hula-hoops
> of pennies tossed into dry wishing wells
> smooth stones skimmed across forgotten streams

Compare that with the two stanzas below from another early sketch in which he fuses the "dust" motif in the published fourth stanza with a reworking of the stanza above:

> This is the litany of lost things,
> the canon of possessions dispossessed
> an old address, the words of a prayer, a melody
> the names of classmates in a photograph
> the dust of roads once traveled, of abandoned rooms,
> gathering more thickly year by year, through formulas
> of reason, how to calculate the surface of a sphere,
> what is the circumference of a trapezoid.

This is the litany of lost words

The conjugations and declensions of dead tongues,

How to say *tree, stone, earth* in

The lyrics of a song the Sisters sang

The way

The letters sent away or never read

Gioia later crafted one stanza from those last two by deletion (literal strike-throughs by hand), replacement, and other honing, in which he re-weighs every word and image for more precise meanings, tighter meter, less cerebral and more emotionally evocative layers, and overall concision. What was left at this further stage of development and revision was this:

This is a litany of lost things,

a canon of possessions dispossessed,

a fountain pen, ~~a pair of glasses left~~ an old address, a key.

~~in an apartment never seen again~~

~~the lyrics of a song, an old address,~~

~~the names of classmates in a photograph,~~

~~some dead now surely—but which and when?~~

~~This is a litany of forgotten words,~~

It is a list of words to memorize—

or to forget—of *amo, amas, amat,*

conjugations of a dead tongue

in which the last sentence has been spoken.

~~Now there is only listening.~~

~~Now there is only memory.~~

~~The rest is silence.~~

Gioia also closed up the line space between those two stanzas to leave just one opening stanza, in which he would eventually replace "a fountain pen" with "a photograph" (a truncation of the discarded lines "the name of classmates in a photograph, / some dead now surely—but which and when?" that readers could flesh out from their own experiences), delete the em-dash after "memorize," insert "the" before "conjugations," and supplant "last" with "final" before "sentence." Below is the polished, finished opening stanza published initially on pages 426-427 in the autumn 1996 issue of *The Hudson Review* and then in *Interrogations at Noon* five years later:

This is a litany of lost things,

a canon of possessions dispossessed,

a photograph, an old address, a key.

It is a list of words to memorize

or to forget—of *amo, amas, amat,*

the conjugations of a dead tongue

in which the final sentence has been spoken. (10)

From those first random jottings of lines and phrases in 1978 or 1979 until *Interrogations at Noon, w*here he could still have made pre-publication modifications, no fewer than twenty-two years had elapsed. The compositional journey Gioia took to produce just the opening seven-line stanza of "The Litany" illustrates once more his

unbending dedication to releasing verse only if it meets his own high standards. Each of the other five stanzas in "The Litany" reflects no less a sedulous commitment and effort from him, though their composition may have happened in less time.

As Gioia once told me, he works slowly and likes to let his unconscious mind compose and then his conscious mind revise carefully. In his brief essay "Revision and Inspiration: A Reflection on the Writing Process" accompanying two versions—the first from 2001 and the second from 1975—of his eventual *Interrogations at Noon* poem "Long Distance" for www.poemoftheweek.org, Gioia comments further about his compositional method:

> I often work on poems for years because a single line or image seems off. My draft isn't bad; it just isn't good enough, so I keep on working.
>
> I've never seen the point of hurrying poems into print. Poetry isn't journalism. The point is excellence, not promptness.[104] Sometimes I'll publish a poem in a journal because it seems finished. But when it comes time to put it in a book, I hesitate because something still needs to be done, though just what that *something* is may still elude me.
>
> I respect the magic and mystery of the poetic art. A poet doesn't will a poem into existence. He or she collaborates with language first to receive initial impulse and then to transcribe it effectively into words. The process is mysterious. There sometimes comes a point when the poet needs to

[104] I understand Gioia's point, though, as a professional journalist for more than three decades, I respectfully demur. Matthew Arnold once defined journalism as "literature in a hurry," and meeting tight deadlines is part of the occupational duty, if not hazard, of a professional journalist. But the best journalism still shows meticulous care, no matter how fast it was ostensibly written. What matters in the end is not quickness but quality.

> surrender control and wait. That notion isn't the philosophy of the workshop, which must necessarily focus on the teachable portions of poetic practice. But a posture of patience and humility toward the imagination is central to the spiritual side of the art. (www.poemoftheweek.org/dana_gioia_id565.html)

The conclusion of that essay was equally emphatic: "The whole point of the game is to get things as close to perfect as possible. Otherwise why write poetry at all?"

Gioia recounted to me how he started "The Litany" during the period of composing his last verse for *The Gods of Winter* when the impulse to create the poem emerged from the aftermath of his son Michael Jasper's premature death. Critic Robert McPhillips also believes "'The Litany' is one of the poems in *Interrogations at Noon*—'Metamorphosis,' 'Pentecost,' and 'A California Requiem' are others—that continues the poet's impossible but necessary dialogue with his deceased son" (*The New Formalism* 56).

"The Litany," however, expands out, taking on more complex, fertile, and musical shape from the merely autobiographical. In a note posted on his website, Gioia states:

> I could say a great many things about "The Litany," but most of them would matter far more to the author than to anyone else. The poem will, I suppose, seem difficult to readers eager for the paraphrasable content of workaday prose. I hope the poem is not opaque, but neither did I want the language to be transparent. A reader will either understand "The Litany" intuitively or not at all. It will help, though, to read the poem aloud. Its organization is musical. Though not all art aspires to the conditions of

> music, this poem wants to be heard and not seen. What better way than musical to describe the invisible?
>
> (http://www.danagioia.net/poems/litany.htm)

Gioia's penultimate sentence above begins with a reference to Walter Pater's famous observation in his essay "The School of Giorgione": "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music." But Gioia struggled with hearing a musical shape for "The Litany," for which he had some lines but no rhythm or melody. Sitting in the Sebastopol, California, library during a visit to his parents, he suddenly heard the sound of the poem, and flowing from that epiphany were the many drafts leading to the final, finished version.

The musicality of Gioia's "The Litany" draws significantly from that of the litanies spoke-sung in a Catholic Mass,[105] where they rely on inherent melody or meter and well-placed repetition with a plank of plainsong underneath it. Gioia combines the litany's incantatory, trancelike musical effect, voiced in deepening devotion, with the poetic device of anaphora—evident in the repetition of "This is" at the outset of the first five stanzas—to create a distinctively aural quality throughout the poem. Stemming from the Greek word *litaneia,* meaning "entreaty," a litany is, in a literal sense, a list, and in religious practice it is a scripted dialogue or call-and-response prayer comprising a series of invocations, supplications, or praises and their brief replies taking place aloud between a priest or other leader and the congregation in ritualized worship. In Gioia's poem the narrator "we" and the audience of "you" (Michael Jasper Gioia, according to Robert

[105] The two most popular are the "Litany of the Saints" (considered the oldest) and the "Litany of Loreto" (also known as the "Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary"). Other litanies include those for Saint Joseph, Sacred Heart of Jesus, Holy Name of Jesus, and Most Precious Blood of Jesus.

McPhillips) and "my reader" (appearing in second line of last stanza) all assume those churchlike roles.

The six stanzas of Gioia's "The Litany" itemize and examine loss, life, nature, faith, doubt, death, grief, and deliverance among other subjects. The first stanza introduces a "litany of lost things" and "a list of words to memorize or to forget," which are the Latin words *amo, amas, amat* translating into English as "I love, you love, he or she loves." Each of the "possessions dispossessed" has been wrenched from the narrative "we" without permission. The second stanza shifts to topography, including "rain, / falling on mountain, field, and ocean— / indifferent, anonymous, complete," suggesting a natural cycle not requiring man's consent or intervention. The third stanza summons the imagery of transubstantiation ("the silent fury of the consecrated wine") and crucifixion ("death of a young god, / brave and beautiful, rotting on a tree") within a "prayer to unbelief" serving as an endorsement of doubt, a plea to the doubter, or an ambivalence involving both. The fourth stanza turns to the topic of death ("earth and ashes") and praises "what we become," that is, "'Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return'" from Genesis 3:19. The fifth stanza assumes a more personal form of address to "you, my love, my lesion," the last word underscoring the ineradicable emotional injury sustained by the narrator after the loss of someone dear. The sixth, or last, stanza enfolds the "you" of the prior stanza into "our litany, *mon vieux*, / my reader, my voyeur," representing everyone mentioned in the poem, with "our litany" additionally becoming the poem itself. The slant rhyme and perhaps pun of "*mon vieux*" (in English, "my old chum" or "my old pal") with "my voyeur" (the reader peering in at the narrator's pain) shows how Gioia can employ humor to temper solemnity. The "pure paradox" of "the shattered river rising as it

falls— / splintering the light, swirling it skyward, / neither transparent nor opaque but luminous" (11) recalls "water . . . rising without our agency" in the second stanza and suggests an inexorability that "we" come to accept if not fully fathom. That bridge between what can be proved and what can be believed is called faith.

In many ways Gioia's "The Litany" forms an echoic complement to "One Art," the famous villanelle composed by his Harvard instructor Elizabeth Bishop, who also wrote of lost "keys" and a special, unnamed "you" (presumably Maria Carlota Costellat de Macedo Soares, or "Lota") in her poem and whose first stanza, "The art of losing isn't hard to master; / so many things seem filled with the intent / to be lost that their loss is no disaster" (*Poems, Prose, and Letters* 166), seems a distant call receiving Gioia's response in his own first stanza. Among the Elizabeth Bishop Papers in the Vassar College Libraries Archives and Special Collections housed on the ground floor of the Vassar College Main Library in Poughkeepsie, New York, are sixteen drafts of "One Art," and the first draft, entitled "The Art of Losing Things," reveals "reading-glasses, fountain pens" in line three. By draft thirteen, "reading-glasses, fountain pens" had been deleted by Bishop. Recall that an early Gioia draft of "The Litany" had "a fountain pen, a pair of glasses" in it. He, too, would shed pen and glasses. Initially published in the April 26, 1976, issue of *The New Yorker,* Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art" appeared with this second stanza: "Lose something every day. Accept the fluster / of lost door keys, the hour badly spent. / The art of losing isn't hard to master" (*Poems, Prose, and Letters* 166).

Dana Gioia's Catholic faith infuses "The Litany" and other verse in *Interrogations at Noon* without any heavy-handed or doctrinaire subtext. As he explained in a 2012 interview:

> What makes my poetry Catholic is the worldview, the sacramental use of symbols, the redemptive role of suffering, the interpenetration of the sacred and the mundane,[106] and—crucially perhaps—the conviction that truth and beauty are interdependent. . . . You shouldn't have to visit the Vatican to sense the divine. It is everywhere if you know how to look." (qtd. in Koss, "A Conversation with Dana Gioia" 77-78)

Or as he summarized in his book *The Catholic Writer Today*: "If Catholic literature has a central theme, it is the difficult journey of the sinner toward redemption. . . . More often than not, sanctity requires struggle" (14).

Layered with inventive diction and wordplay, such as the consonance of the "d" in the line "to candles guttering and darkness undivided" and the sibilance prevalent in the line "to the fine silt circling in a shaft of sun" (10), "The Litany" is one of several outstanding, canon-poised poems in *Interrogations at Noon*.

The volume itself is bookended by two poems of superior linguistic quality ironically about the relative inadequacy of language to match the natural, emotional, and psychological content it attempts to describe. *Interrogations at Noon* opens with the stress verse of "Words," which asserts that "The world does not need words" yet also claims that "To name is to know and remember" (3). As Matthew Brennan pointed out,

> Language thus affirms the organic world even though it's ultimately unpossessable, its beauty indifferent, "greater than ourselves and all the airy words we summon" (3). The well-crafted stanzas manifest the

[106] Gioia's phrase "the sacred and the mundane" may be subtly invoking or playing off Mircea Eliade's influential book from the late 1950s, *The Sacred and the Profane*, which examines manifestations and memories of the sacred persisting in and still affecting the presumably profane modern world.

> suggestion that our redemption lies in our representations and memory of this greater world, which help connect us to it, however tenuously. (*Dana Gioia: A Critical Introduction* 43)

The concluding six-line poem, "Unsaid," is written in iambic pentameter and recognizes the sometimes Sisyphean task of expressing what might be deemed inexpressible in verse or any other form of literature, even though part of literature's goal is to find words commensurate with feelings and phenomena. According to Robert McPhillips, "This short poem echoes the volume's first, 'Words,' by returning to the idea that the profoundest emotions 'are no less real for having passed unsaid'" (*The New Formalism* 58). A fitting valediction for *Interrogations at Noon*, the poem possesses an intensity of insight ideally matched with its expression in language: "What we conceal / Is always more than what we dare confide" (69). The last line, "Think of the letters that we write our dead," aptly encapsulates what Dana Gioia frequently strives to achieve: communication through the power of poetry with those precious to him and now gone. "Loss for Dana Gioia is not an intellectual abstraction," affirms Gary M. Bouchard in his essay "Our Litany: The Varied Voices and Common Vision of Three Contemporary Catholic Poets" (141). Verse as strong and compelling as Gioia's helps to keep the deceased alive.

Furthermore, the notion of communicating with the dead is not imaginary for Gioia. In a September 3, 2010, interview he gave to *The Irish Rover*, an alternative student newspaper at the University of Notre Dame, Gioia said, "Every poet has hard hours and dark nights of the soul. After my first son died, I had them every night for years. If I had not been able to talk to Dante and Shakespeare, Rilke and Frost, Borges

and Cavafy, and heard them talk about their own sorrows and losses, I might have given up" (Lindsley, "An Interview with Dana Gioia," www.irishrover.net?p=4226). When he was asked in that same interview, "Do you really talk to the dead?," this was his answer:

> All the time. Remember I'm a Latin—Sicilian and Mexican. We don't share the Anglo-Saxon embarrassment about death. In Mexican neighborhoods the Day of the Dead is a festival. Dante wrote a pretty good poem about all the dead folks he visited.
>
> I suggest we end our campaign of discrimination against the departed. They are a pretty interesting crowd—at least if we choose our dead friends carefully. Don't forget that we are all future members of this marginalized group.

Also distinguishing Gioia's *Interrogations at Noon* are his poems about romance, usually stoked by ardor, staggered by missteps, roiled by regret, or eased by escape. They include "The Voyeur," "Corner Table," "Long Distance," "My Dead Lover," "Accomplice," "The Bargain," "Spider in the Corner," and "Summer Storm," the last of which ends with these two stanzas:

> There are so many *might-have-beens,*
> *What-ifs* that won't stay buried,
> Other cities, other jobs,
> Strangers we might have married.
>
> And memory insists on pining
> For places it never went,

As if life would be happier

Just by being different. (67)

In "Elegy with Surrealist Proverbs as Refrain," an *Interrogations at Noon* poem written as a loose alexandrine, appears this quote ascribed to French poet, novelist, and essayist André Breton (1896-1966), founder of the Surrealist movement: "Better to die of love / than love without regret" (8). Perhaps no other line in Gioia's verse better distills his attitude and conviction about romantic love.

In his review of *Interrogations at Noon* for the winter 2002 issue of *The Antioch Review,* poet and essayist Ned Balbo neatly summed up Gioia's third volume of verse: His "poems are superb in their blend of toughness and vulnerability, their quest for solace before loss, their measured yet memorable voice, and though *Interrogations at Noon* often speaks of death and absence, it offers the consolation of uncommon craft" (167). No poem in this book reveals anything less than Dana Gioia's consummate craft.

Chapter 7

WHAT NATIVE SPEECH DO WE SHARE BUT IMPERFECTION?

"We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric,
but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry."
– William Butler Yeats

What do U.S. poet Dana Gioia and British singer Amy Winehouse (September 14, 1983-July 23, 2011) have in common? Besides a love of music, it is "Poetry Pairing: The Beautiful and the Bad" by Katherine Schulten for one of *The New York Times'* learning blogs on September 15, 2011. Part of a collaborative online series between the newspaper and the Poetry Foundation, it juxtaposed Gioia's entire poem "Pity the Beautiful," comprising five rhyming quatrains of syncopated two-stress lines published initially in the May 2011 issue of *Poetry* magazine,[107] with an excerpt from "A Bad Girl with a Touch of Genius," Guy Trebay's July 27, 2011, article about Winehouse under the section title of "Fashion & Style" in *The New York Times.*

The newspaper's learning blog ran a short introduction, attributed to the Poetry Foundation, for the reprint of Gioia's poem that stated it "stirs up questions of fortune and fate," a banal, soundbite-like description that could apply to almost anything. But Gioia's poem does make a suitable complement to Trebay's description of the troubled vocalist that begins "'It's hard to look that cheap and pull it off,' John Waters said admiringly of Amy Winehouse," and later explores "the visual persona Ms. Winehouse concocted over her brief career" (learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/15/poetry-pairing-the-beautiful-and-the-bad). Whatever the effect of the article on Winehouse's legacy may

[107] *Poetry* magazine is published by the Poetry Foundation, based in Chicago.

have been, it certainly gave Gioia and his poem an unexpected veneer of pop-cultural hipness, however briefly. Imagine: Gioia had suddenly come to the attention of a much larger, mainstream audience—the countless fans of pop, rock, blues, rhythm-and-blues, reggae, and neo-punk, all genres of music detectable in Winehouse's vocal style and found in her repertoire.[108]

Usually Gioia resists any request to explain, interpret, or source his verse out of concern for unduly limiting its experiential resonance and interpretive possibilities for readers. But in the *Alhambra Poetry Calendar 2013 Poetry Anthology*, an obscure publication combining a desk calendar and anthology of 365 poems by more than 300 poets that was issued in several languages (including English) by Belgium's Alhambra Publishing, Gioia's "Pity the Beautiful" appears on the "Wednesday, 08 May" page with this rare note by him on the poem's provenance and inspiration:

> Back in my early twenties I knew a remarkably beautiful young woman. She was so striking that people simply loved being around her, even women who found her likable and down to earth. Everyone took care of her in a thousand small ways, and so she never really developed the toughness adult life requires. She worked as a model for a few years with some occasional jobs on television. She married twice. Then her looks went, and she seemed hopelessly stranded by life. I hadn't seen her for twenty-five years when I learned that she had died of a heart attack at 53.

[108] The so-called Great American Songbook can be added to Amy Winehouse's diverse repertoire after she collaborated with Tony Bennett on the 1930 song "Body and Soul" that appeared on his *Duets II* album in 2011 and DVD in 2012. A video of their duet that also shows Winehouse's flair for fashion is at www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OFMkCeP6ok.

> A few months later this poem suddenly came to me. It never mentions her, but I think it all the better for keeping its origins a secret.

Perhaps Gioia assumed the secret would remain safe in this off-the-beaten-path publication. But even if many more readers discovered his disclosure, it would hardly hobble their appreciation of the poem.

Its first three quatrains virtually challenge the reader to summon even a smidgeon of genuine pity for "the dolls, and the dishes, / the babes with big daddies / granting their wishes," "the pretty boys / the hunks, the Apollos, / the golden lads whom / success always follows," and "the hotties, the knock-outs, the tens out of ten, / the drop-dead gorgeous, / the great leading men" (45). The demotic, slang-spiced diction and clipped tone used by Gioia suggest a breezy, barely concealed contempt for those blessed by unearned beauty genes and other accidents of pulchritude.

But in the fourth quatrain comes a dramatic turn in the poem:

> Pity the faded,
> The bloated, the blowsy,
> The paunchy Adonis
> Whose luck's gone lousy.

The pity there takes on a hue of seriousness and even a little sympathy for the effortlessly beautiful whom time has cruelly tarnished.

The first two lines of the last quatrain elevate the sobering insights of the previous quatrain onto the plane of religious worship: "Pity the gods, / no longer divine." A piecemeal diminishment of beauty also affects the aesthetic and spiritual contemplation of God or the gods, essentially sapping their godliness as once beautiful and uplifting

iconography and ritual yield to less inspirational, more prosaic modes. As Gioia explained in an interview with *The Los Angeles Loyolan* on January 30, 2014: "I would like to see beauty integrated meaningfully into every aspect of Catholic worship, not just church architecture and church music, but in every detail. At the moment so much Catholic art is really mediocre—banal paintings, sentimental sculpture, drab architecture, horrifying music" (qtd. in Busse, "Burning Questions with Dana Gioia," www.laloyalan.com/news/burning-questions-with-dana-gioia). He also believes the concept of "beautiful," inside as much as outside, has been cheapened or coarsened into the superficially "pretty." For Gioia, the experience of beauty results in "an arresting of attention, a moment of stillness," and fosters "a vision of redemptive order in the fallen world" (qtd. in www.lumenchristi.org/beauty).

The final two lines of the last quatrain point to a sadness arguably leading to a benign self-pity if the night's "stars lose their shine," that is, lose their capacity for evoking wonder, reverie, and humility from us as we stare up and savor.

"Pity the Beautiful" is the titular poem in Gioia's fourth volume of verse, greeted by many poetry devotees and literati[109]as "a worthy addition to his canon" that "confirms Gioia's hallmark diversity of subjects and styles and forms a sturdy addition to his poetic edifice" (Brennan, *Dana Gioia: A Critical Introduction* 50, 62). The response of poet and critic Bruce Bawer to *Pity the Beautiful*, which was published in early May 2012, that is, eleven years after *Interrogations at Noon,* was far stronger: Gioia

[109] Although these enclaves are obviously smaller in number than the audience once enjoyed by the late Amy Winehouse, they are no less dedicated and loyal.

> 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." ("The Flâneur, the Chemist, and the Chairman" 336)

Ned Balbo's "The Two Dana Gioias," an essay assessing *Pity the Beautiful*, reacted similarly:

> Dana Gioia the poet is due more recognition. . . . 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 private poet whose work is sensitive, darkly funny, smart, and certain to prove lasting. (230-31)

In "Redemption Songs," her own laudatory review of *Pity the Beautiful*, poet Angela Alaimo O'Donnell calls it "compelling, haunting and, in fact, beautiful" (30) and singles out several of its poems for substantive comment. One is "Majority," the volume's final poem, comprising five free-verse quatrains with two-beat and three-beat lines. At the back of the book, Gioia adds a brief note: "This poem commemorates the

twenty-first birthday of my first son who died in infancy" (71). Here is "Majority" in its entirety[110]:

Now you'd be three,
I said to myself,
seeing a child born
the same summer as you.

Now you'd be six,
or seven, or ten.
I watched you grow
in foreign bodies.

Leaping into a pool, all laughter,
or frowning over a keyboard,
but mostly just standing,
taller each time.

How splendid your most
mundane action seemed
in these joyful proxies.
I often held back tears.

[110] Dana Gioia gave me permission for reprinting all the poems appearing in full in this dissertation.

> Now you are twenty-one.
>
> Finally, it makes sense
>
> that you have moved away
>
> into your own afterlife. (68)

O'Donnell brings her review of *Pity the Beautiful* further to life with this concluding description of how Gioia's public reading of that poem in an unnamed venue[111] in New York City affected the audience, including O'Donnell:

> As he prefaced his recitation with the circumstances of the poem, I saw a woman seated in front of me place her arm around the shoulders of the woman beside her, marking her companion as a mother who had lost a child. I could not take my eyes from this bereft mother as she listened to the poem, her head nodding in assent, tears streaming soundlessly down her cheeks and, strangely, a gentle smile on her lips. Here was public witness to the power of poetry to speak the unspeakable, articulate for us what we cannot, and redeem our most piteous losses through beauty. The community poetry makes of our brokenness somehow makes us whole. At the end of the reading, we all stood up, applauded and streamed out into the rainy night, stricken and triumphant. (32)

[111] That venue was almost certainly the Corner Bookstore, 1313 Madison Avenue at 93rd Street, Manhattan, where Gioia's reading from *Pity the Beautiful* began at 6 p.m. EST on April 26, 2012. Evidence comes from David Lehman's "The Businessman, the Statesman, and the Poet," the introduction he gave for Gioia that evening at the Corner Bookstore and posted at the Best American Poetry blog, and from "Pity the Beautiful," the May 5, 2012, blog of singer, songwriter, and novelist Lori Carson, who attended Gioia's reading at the Corner Bookstore and noted "by 5:45 it was still raining" and "the bookstore was already packed" (lifeandmusic.loricarson.com/?p=506).

Among other poems addressing such difficult, emotional topics in *Pity the Beautiful* are the irregularly rhymed sonnet "The Road," which begins "He sometimes felt that he had missed his life / By being far too busy looking for it" (9) that echoes the line "the ways we miss our lives are life" in Randall Jarrell's poem "A Girl in a Library" (*The Complete Poems* 18); "The Lunatic, the Lover, and the Poet," a double sonnet in nonce-form, seven-line stanzas taking its title from the lines "The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact" in Theseus's speech in act five, scene one, of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (152) and containing such wise observations as "We weave / The fabric of our existence out of words, / And the right story tells us who we are" and "The tale is often wiser than the teller"[112] (13); the blank-verse "Autumn Inaugural" ending with this probing question: "What native speech do we share but imperfection?" (27); and "Prayer at Winter Solstice," comprising seven free-verse couplets that contain such updated beatitudes as "Blessed is the road that keeps us homeless" and "Blessed is the love that in losing we discover" (17), the latter of which can be perceived as a coda to "The Litany" in *Interrogations at Noon* and all of which "praise the suffering and renunciation necessary to make us spiritually alert," states Gioia. "It is also a poem about facing the hard realities of our existence. Our feel-good society tries to deny suffering" ("Poet and Former NEA Chair Dana Gioia: The Divine Is Everywhere," http://www.lumenchristi. org/gioia).

Humor is no less important to Gioia, and the six free-verse quatrains of "The Seven Deadly Sins" deliver plenty of it. "One of the great things about Catholicism is that

[112] Gioia may have been influenced by these lines from D. H. Lawrence's "The Spirit of Place" in *Studies in Classic American Literature:* "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale. The proper function of a critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it" (8).

it has numbered lists, and probably my favorite list is the seven deadly sins," he told *The Chicago Maroon,* the student newspaper of the University of Chicago. "I see all seven, all huddled together in a second-rate diner around a prospective sinner" (qtd. in Bendaas, "Can Poetry Matter? Gioia's Work Offers Absolute 'Yes,'" http://chicagomaroon.com/2013/10/18/can-poetry-matter-gioias-work-offers-absolute-yes). The poem is narrated by a haughtily disdainful Pride, and Gioia deftly distills the essence of each anthropomorphized deadly sin through Pride's narration: "Lust is a looker / but you can do better," "The food's so bad that even Gluttony / can't finish his meal," "Avarice / keeps refilling his glass / whenever he thinks we're not looking," "Envy eyes your plate," "Anger / is already arguing about the bill," and "It's a relief to see Sloth's / fat ass go out the door" (26). True to his nature, Pride has the final say: "But stick around. I have a story / that not everyone appreciates— / about the special satisfaction / of staying on board as the last / grubby lifeboat pushes away." In a classic Greek tragedy where the cliché of "pride goeth before the fall" customarily holds sway, the hubris of Pride is also his hamartia. He arrogantly assumes he will be the exception, the one who stays on and survives a sinking ship because everyone else, including his fellow six deadly sins whom he dubs "losers," lacks his cunning and savvy.

Three other poems of incalculable poignancy in *Pity the Beautiful* warrant special mention: "Finding a Box of Family Letters," consisting of nine free-verse stanzas of five lines each; "Special Treatments Ward," divided into three sections of iambic pentameter stanzas in irregular rhymes with a single-line coda; and "The Haunted," a blank-verse narrative poem that is the longest entry in the book.

Forming a kind of triptych with "Photograph of My Mother as a Young Girl" in *Daily Horoscope* and "Unsaid' in *Interrogations at Noon,* "Finding a Box of Family Letters" begins "The dead say little in their letters / they haven't said before. We find no secrets, and yet / how different every sentence sounds / heard across the years" (18). The poem's "I" narrator is a son describing a photograph of "a banquet sixty years ago" (18) attended by his parents, younger than he is, and he wonders "What does it cost to send a postcard / to the underworld? . . . the ghost of some postal worker . . . carrying our dead letters to their lost addresses" (19). The narrator tries to snap out of wistfulness—"It's silly to get sentimental. / The dead have moved on. So should we"—yet still poses a pertinent question: "But isn't it equally simpleminded to miss / the special expertise of the departed / in clarifying our long-term plans?" The poem's italicized entreaties—"*Come back, Dad!*," "*Get out there on the floor and dance!* / *You don't have forever*," "*Get out there and dance!*," "*Love always. Can't wait to get home!*," and "*See you there*"—become *carpe diem* exhortations (four end in exclamation points) taken to heart by the narrator, who realizes the dead "never let us forget that the line / between them and us is only temporary" (19).

"Special Treatments Ward" is heartbreaking from its first line: "So this is where the children come to die" (29). The background for this extraordinary poem emerged fully in an interview Gioia did for the quarterly *Image* in spring 2012:

> This was the most difficult poem I've ever written. It began when my second son [Theodore Jasper][113] had a serious injury that required an extended stay in a children's neurological ward where nearly every other

[113] Theodore Jasper Gioia was born on November 21, 1988. Dana and Mary Gioia's third son, Michael Frederick Gioia, was born on January 18, 1993.

> child was dying of a brain or spinal tumor. Having lost my first son, I was entirely vulnerable to the pain and confusion of the sick children and their desperate parents. I began to write a poem about how unprepared everyone in the ward was for what they had to face. But the poem kept growing and changing. It took me sixteen years to finish. I didn't want to finish it. I wanted to forget it, but the poem demanded to be finished. So the poem is not simply about my first son or my second son, though they are both mentioned. It is about the children who died." (qtd. in Koss, "A Conversation with Dana Gioia" 71)

Several critics cited "Special Treatments Ward" as "unquestionably one of Gioia's best poems" (Brennan, *Dana Gioia: A Critical Introduction* 58) and "a moving eulogy" (Bowles, "Top Shelf: Imperfection as Our Native Speech," www.themonitor.com). The poem fulfills Gioia's own requirements for effective narrative verse, which needs to depict "a significant action with its motives and consequences" and "to find a style at once flexible enough to tell a story but still capable of poetic force and lyric resonance." It also must "tell a story of moral consequence. Something of life-or-death importance had to be at the heart of the poem. Otherwise it was hard to build a work of sufficient intensity that transformed narrative verse into real poetry" (Snyder, "If Any Fire Endures beyond Its Flame: an Interview with Dana Gioia," September 22, 2006, www.thefreelibrary.com).

Narrated in the first person, the poem painstakingly details real pain without any hint of excess or sensationalism. The language is simply too sensitive and luminous for that to occur, as this second stanza shows:

> The mothers spend their nights inside the ward,
> sleeping on chairs that fold out into beds,
> too small to lie in comfort. Soon they slip
> beside their children, as if they might mesh
> those small bruised bodies back into their flesh.
> Instinctively they feel that love so strong
> protects a child. Each morning proves them wrong. (29)

In section two of the poem, the narrator confesses he "put this poem aside twelve years ago / because I could not bear remembering / the faces it evoked" and asks rhetorically, "What right had I whose son had walked away / to speak for those who died?" (30).

In section three of the poem, the narrator describes how the deceased children from this special treatments ward visit him "not just in dream, / appearing suddenly, silently" and "Risen they are healed but not made whole" (31). His own distress as a parent who "lost one child / and couldn't bear to watch another die" in section two turns almost palpable in this solemn admission in section three: "I cannot wake them from their satin beds," that is, their caskets. Few poems in contemporary American verse pack as much feeling and force as "Special Treatments Ward."

Though obviously not as complex as the narrative strategy wielded by Henry James in his own famous "apparition" story, *The Turn of the Screw*, Dana Gioia's "Haunted" is nevertheless both an engrossing ghost story in conception and a tour de force in implementation. "This poem began with the first two lines: 'I don't believe in ghosts,' Gioia said. 'Such nonsense. / But years ago I actually saw one.' As soon as I

heard those two lines, the whole poem started to unfold, though it took an immense amount of work to create the narrative tone and the musical qualities I wanted" (qtd. in Koss, "A Conversation with Dana Gioia" 71).

The opening italicized lines introduce and frame the narrative, though the reader does not know who exactly is speaking until the end. That suspenseful suspension of narrator identity enhances the poem's mystery and deepens the jolt when the narrator reveals who he is. The exchange assumes the form of a monologue in which an older, unidentified narrator does almost all of the speaking and a younger, unidentified listener remains silent. Besides the voice of the narrator, the only voices actually heard in the poem are briefly those of the narrator's erstwhile lover Mara, the ghost, and a dairy truck driver.

According to Gioia, "'Haunted' is a ghost story that turns into a love story about a mutually destructive couple" (qtd. in Koss, "A Conversation with Dana Gioia" 72), and is full of wry comments and life-altering realizations. The first stanza immediately makes a vivid demarcation between generations and eras:

> It happened almost forty years ago.
> The world was different then—not just for ghosts—
> slower, less frantic. You're too young to know
> life without cell phones, laptops, satellite.
> You didn't bring the world with you everywhere.
> Out in the country, you were quite alone. (35)

The next stanza roots the erstwhile lovers within their time:

> I was in love with Mara then, if love

Is the right word for that particular
delusion. We were young. We thought we could
create a life made only of peak moments.
We laughed. We drank. We argued and made love.
Our battles were Homeric—not Homer's heroes
but his gods, petty, arrogant Olympians
thundering in their egotistic rage. (35)

As this narrative poem unfolds, the reader soon comprehends the depth of dysfunction between the couple. "Brilliant, beautiful, refined" Mara is also "rich" and "cruel," prompting the narrator's question, "Do you know what it's like to be in love / with someone bad? Not simply bad for you, / but slightly evil?" (35). Gioia, as storytelling poet, knows that a skein of one-sided animadversion might wear thin on the reader and lead to speculation about the reliability of the narrator in his characterization of Mara. So Gioia gives his narrator these three lines to dampen that possibility: "If I sound slightly bitter, please understand, / it is myself I now despise, not Mara. / She simply recognized what I desired" (36).

The narrator recounts how he spent a few autumn days alone with Mara in her uncle's "country manor" resting on "hundreds of wooded acres whispering wealth" in the Berkshires and containing art that was "grand, authentic, second rate" (36). This

sumptuous excess was the desired effect,
a joyful shout to celebrate success—
good taste be damned—let's just indulge ourselves
and revel like a child who greets his playmates

by emptying his toy chest on the floor.

What fun is wealth if no one notices?

Mara seemed to think so. What did I know?

I'd never seen the rich up close before. (37)

That large gap in wealth (favoring Mara) and taste (favoring the narrator) is one of many tensions between these lovers in a poem detailing the Dionysian self-indulgence of both characters who seem to alternate making love with making war. When the narrator, who "drank too much" and tries to sleep in a separate room, espies "a handsome woman in her early forties . . . elegantly dressed" entering the room, he thinks it is Mara, then a housekeeper, but soon realizes it "seemed to be a ghost, though that sounds crazy" (39). She was "translucent, insubstantial, but still there" (40), the narrator observes, who could not find the words to address "this traveler from the undiscovered country," paraphrasing the lines "The undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveler returns" in the famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy in act three, scene 1, of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (144). The poem's ghost "whispered, almost in a hiss, / 'You don't belong here. No, you don't belong here'" (41), the truth of which sinks in for the narrator when he mutters silently to himself, "I don't belong here, / I don't belong here" (41).

Acting on those words, the narrator decides abruptly to leave the manor and Mara; "what I couldn't wear / I left behind—the clothes, the books, the camera, / no longer mine. What a surprise to first feel / the liberations of divestiture" as he bids "Good-bye to both my ghosts" (41). Eventually hitching a ride on "on old dairy truck," the narrator is asked by the driver, "What happened to your shoes? . . . No, better yet, don't tell me. Just get in" (42).

The last two stanzas finally reveal the identities of the narrator and his silent listener:

> I climbed in, and one road led to another.
> And now I'm in your bar. That's probably not
> the story you expected from a monk,
> delivering brandy from the monastery.
> Not all of us began as altar boys.
>
> I've been there fifteen years. I like the drill—
> Poverty, Chastity, and Growing Grapes.
> The archbishop calls my port a miracle.
> Don't tell His Grace, but I still doubt there is
> an afterlife. That's not why I stay there.
> This is the life I didn't want to waste. (42).

Without specifying the monastic order in which the narrator is a member, Gioia may still have had the Benedictine order in mind because St. Benedict had established the first monastic order leading to monasteries balancing religious instruction and rites with practical undertakings such as winemaking and farming. The guiding spiritual rule of these monastic communities often centers on vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, so when the poem's narrator-monk divulges he likes "the drill— / Poverty, Chastity, and Growing Grapes," it perhaps hints that his fleshpot past and independent nature have not quite evaporated entirely. The narrator's preparatory divestiture for monastic life is

symbolized by the clothes and other items he willingly abandons at the country manor and by the fact that he is traveling barefoot afterward. For critic Ned Balbo,

> 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. ("The Two Dana Gioias" 229)

In Gioia's *Pity the Beautiful* and prior three volumes of verse, faith can still be a tortuous and even torturous path to a clearer, more assured answer to a persistent question: What do you want to be in life, and how do you want to spend it? In the talk he delivered at the Lumen Christi Institute of the University of Chicago in October 2013, Gioia offered this bit of counsel to his audience: "The thing about life is, if you pretend to be something you are not, you spend an incredible amount of time doing that. . . . You exhaust yourself. If you're doing what you love, it's as easy as breathing" (qtd. in Bendaas, "Can Poetry Matter? Gioia's Work Offers Absolute 'Yes,'" http:// chicagomaroon.com/2013/10/18/ can-poetry-matter-gioias-work-offers-absolute-yes).

Chapter 8

THIS IS THE WAY, WALK IN IT

"Even in advocacy, a critic's task is not to praise but to praise rightly." – Dana Gioia

In this dissertation my goal, like Gioia's, was not to praise but to praise rightly. Not every poem written by Gioia merits canonical consideration, but more than enough of them do, including those analyzed previously. Not every essay of literary criticism by Gioia deserves a higher perch on Parnassus, but enough of them do, including the ones cited earlier. And not all of Gioia's public arts advocacy has met with universal applause, though enough of it has engendered enthusiasm or approbation to join his verse and critical essays as together worthy of raised recognition.

Gioia has certainly had his share of negative critiques, as prior chapters have shown. One of the most excoriating reviews of his literary criticism was "'Disappearing Ink': This Be the Prose" by A. O. Scott in the November 21, 2004, issue of *The New York Times.* According to Scott's review of *Disappearing Ink,* Gioia's third book of literary criticism, "even the three pages[114] of the preface seem disproportionately loaded with abstractions, clichés and nuggets of wisdom so uncontroversial as to be inane" (www.nytimes.com/2004/11/21/books/review/ 21SCOTTL). Scott later adds: The book's "most maddening aspect is not Gioia's undergraduate prose, but rather his knack for taking genuinely interesting and urgent questions and making them seem, by the time he is finished considering them, much less so." Saving his best salvo for the last paragraph in his review, Scott writes: "'An Interesting Essay Remains to Be Written' could be the

[114] Actually Gioia's "Preface" spilled on to a fourth page, xiv.

title of this collection, which is pretty much useless either as cultural analysis or as literary criticism."

Perhaps the staunchest, steadfast critic of Gioia's poetry and literary criticism is Marjorie Perloff, Professor Emerita of English at Stanford University and currently Florence R. Scott Professor of English Emerita in the University of Southern California's Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, with which Dana Gioia is also affiliated as Judge Widney Professor of Poetry and Public Culture.[115] In "The Alter(ed) Ground of Poetry and Pedagogy: Conversation with Charles Bernstein," Perloff states with initial sarcasm that

> anyone, it seems, can be a poet. *The New York Times* praised Dana Gioia precisely because he had worked for ten years for General Foods and made his mint before turning to poetry—evidently something one can do by a sheer act of will. One declares oneself a poet, period. So then anyone of course can also be a poetry critic and comment on the quality of the poetry. This past week *The Wall Street Journal* announced that Gioia was one of "our finest poets" without ever saying how or why. It seems their columnists simply know. (Perloff, *Poetics in a New Key: Interviews and Essays* 77)

In her essay "The Decay of a Discipline: Reflections on the English Department Today" for the fall/winter 2011 issue of the journal *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences,* Perloff also assailed the decision to give Gioia an endowed chair at USC:

[115] His USC appointment also includes the Thornton School of Music, Marshall School of Business, and Price School of Public Policy.

> The new Professor of Poetry has neither a Ph.D. nor a publication record that would be considered distinguished in most academic quarters. Whereas USC's recently appointed Distinguished and University Professors in the Physical Sciences are all members of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Gioia is not; nor has he been, say, a Guggenheim Fellow.[116] Rather, he has been, over the last decade, a prominent public figure. (154-55)

This arguably uncollegial sniping was not exclusive to Perloff.[117] In answering an interview question about critics of New Formalism, Gioia remarked:

> The many attacks on the revival of form and narrative were not only noteworthy for their ferocity; they were also remarkable for their disregard for fact. I'm not speaking here of disagreements over poetic principles. Honest arguments enliven the culture. What I'm talking about is the fabrication of data by critics unwilling to do research. Marjorie Perloff, for example, did not hesitate to invent biographical details about writers she attacked. Ill will is no substitute for research. Her self-righteous apoplexy over New Formalism is simply delicious. She sounds like an old-time Baptist preacher denouncing rock 'n' roll. (qtd. in "America and the Culture of Poetry," *The Review: An International Literary Magazine* 96)

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[116] A Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, Perloff was president of the Modern Language Association in 2006 and the American Comparative Literature Association during 1993-95. She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for 1981-82 and a Senior National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship for 1986-86.

[117] Matthew Brennan also acknowledged that "Marjorie Perloff has multiple times singled out Gioia for attacks, even calling him 'untalented'" (*Dana Gioia: A Critical Introduction* 46).

An enduring feud, if that is what it is, hardly enhances calm, civil exchanges between scholars, especially two who teach at the same university. Neither comes off particularly well in these brickbat interactions.

The intensity of such differences, however, should not distract from or obscure a key question to be posed about Gioia's overall verse: What in it is needed for our age? In his finest poems he imparts a core conviction that pain, suffering, and loss provide a conduit to greater humility, contrition, empathy, kindness, patience, reflection, and transformation, all qualities of a penitent continually struggling with fault and sin but not willing to capitulate to them in a postlapsarian world. This endless cycle of relapse and redemption defines Catholicism in its purest form, and Gioia embraces it in his faith and in his verse. In the new set of beatitudes listed in "Prayer at Winter Solstice," which Gioia called "the most Catholic poem I've ever written" (qtd. in Koss, "A Conversation with Dana Gioia" 71), the narrator blesses obstacles and setbacks that can lead to absolution through the sheer will to cope with and surmount them. And in "Pentecost" are these pleas: "Comfort me with stones. Quench my thirst with sand" (*Interrogations at Noon* 18).

Gioia's poetry also encourages a wider perception and deeper appreciation of beauty in the world, no matter how tumbledown parts of it may be. "Splendor in ruins is splendor still" (*Daily Horoscope* 20), the implied narrator of "In Cheever Country" observes. The simultaneous stability and mutability of land, flora, fauna, and sky possess a sacramental reward for those open to it. In "Places to Return," a poem about landscapes, the narrator explicitly states that "return seems like a sacrament" (*The Gods of Winter* 26). "Beauty is not a luxury," Gioia explained. "It is humanity's natural

response to the splendor and mystery of creation. To assume that some group doesn't need beauty is to deny their humanity" (qtd. in Koss, "A Conversation with Dana Gioia" 75).

While retaining a healthy religious skepticism, the whetstone for faith, he proudly admits that his "deepest relationships are mostly with the dead. That will make no sense to some people, but it seems quite natural to a Catholic raised on the notion of the communion of saints. What has sustained me has been my sense of literature as an expression of the City of God, a place one has elected to enter in contradiction to the City of Man" (qtd. in Koss, "A Conversation with Dana Gioia" 76-77). A crystallization of Gioia's ongoing communication with the departed is his poems "Finding a Box of Family Letters" and "Unsaid."

In a sense this dissertation has attempted to do for Dana Gioia what he has attempted to do for John Allan Wyeth, Weldon Kees, Donald Justice, Kay Ryan, Samuel Menashe, Howard Moss, Donald Davie, and several other U.S. writers: elevate cultural awareness of talent overlooked, underappreciated, or unfairly dismissed. In the long shadow cast by controversy stemming from his May 1991 *Atlantic* essay "Can Poetry Matter?" and from his ill-fitting profile as an avatar for equally controversial New Formalism during the 1980s, Dana Gioia has published four volumes of verse, three books of literary criticism, and two libretti that have not yet generated the more widespread canonical reconsideration they and he deserve. He has demonstrated repeatedly that his uncommon polymathy is not a curse but a blessing as one gift nurtures another. The variety of his own impressive, aesthetic gifts mirrors his claim that verse in particular should never be held captive by any one "ism," movement, or form but should

remain receptive to all forms--free and fixed--in order to create the best work possible. It is why his own poetry roughly splits into "one third free verse, one third rhymed verse, and one third unrhymed metrical verse" (Lindsley, "An Interview with Dana Gioia," www.irishrover.net?p=4226).

Should Gioia be accorded a Teflon coat when he is criticized? Of course not. His poetry, literary criticism, and public arts advocacy have possibly dismayed as many people as they delighted. He understands that and is prepared to receive or rebut censure. Gioia also knows that lockstep may be culturally safe but is hardly conducive to innovation and lasting change. As a proponent and leading practitioner of Expansive Poetry, he helped to re-open verse to the larger potential in technique, content, and audience that it enjoyed in the past. He also recognized that when scholarly opinions on poetry become sclerotic, the only hardening that results is in the resolve of readers to forsake it. His whole purpose as a literary critic and public arts advocate is to introduce more people to the pleasures and passions stirred not so much by "fine art" as by the best diverse art. The official slogan of the National Endowment for the Arts under his leadership manifests his aesthetic conviction: "A Great Nation Deserves Great Art."[118]

An entire dissertation could easily be written about Gioia's *ne plus ultra* chairmanship of the NEA. In a chapter aptly entitled "Building a New Consensus" in the book *National Endowment for the Arts: A History, 1965-2008,* published under the auspices of the NEA and edited by Mark Bauerlein,[119] Dana Gioia is properly credited for

[118] Under Rocco Landesman, a successful Broadway producer who succeeded Gioia as NEA chairman from August 7, 2009, to December 31, 2012, the agency's official slogan became the rather abrupt and tepid "Art Works."

[119] A professor of English at Emory University, Bauerlein courted some controversy of his own in his provocatively titled 2008 book, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future, or Don't Trust Anyone under 30.* In it Baurlein offers the counter-example of

salving the residual wounds of the so-called Culture Wars in which Andres Serrano, whose photograph of a crucifix in an amber liquid was entitled *Piss Christ,* and Robert Mapplethorpe, whose photographs featured sexually explicit images, were *causes célèbres*. Because they benefited in the late 1980s from grant money provided by the NEA, a federal institution largely dependent on tax revenue, the ensuing political tumult and public outcry spurred several cuts in the budget of the NEA and challenges to its existence. By the time Gioia arrived and started working as nominee designate chairman in November 2002, the NEA was still an embattled, weakened agency. Further complicating Gioia's official accession to the NEA chairmanship in February 2003 was the pall over the agency created by the sudden death of his predecessor, Michael Hammond, of natural causes at age sixty-nine. He was officially chairman for only seven days, from January 23 to January 29, 2002, and during the interim between Hammond and Gioia, Senior Deputy Chairman Eileen Mason served as acting chairman.

To NEA Chairman Dana Gioia,

> the question . . . was not should the NEA exist, but how could the NEA best serve the nation? . . . His vision stressed, first, that the agency needed to serve all Americans, including tens of millions in rural areas, inner cities, and military bases who had historically been ignored by the NEA. Second, the agency must enhance culture and enrich community life, especially by connecting "America with the best of its creative spirit." (*National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008,* 148)

"Dana Gioia, who credits his escape from the high-crime, low-education streets of Hawthorne, California, to two things: the public library and the piano lessons his mother forced him to take. They quickened his imagination to a fate other than that of his classmates—aimlessness, odd jobs, and prison" (25-26).

Programs he oversaw or initiated at the NEA had immediate or lasting impact. They include "Poetry Out Loud: National Recitation Contest," celebrating its tenth anniversary in 2015 and involving hundreds of thousands of students nationwide in the passionate pursuit of memorizing and saying verse "out loud" with confidence in front of an audience.

Another program was "Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience," which was "aimed at preserving the stories and reflections of American troops who have served our nation on the frontlines—as in Afghanistan and Iraq—and stateside defending the homeland" (Gioia, "Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience" pamphlet, iv). Out of this NEA program came a 2008 Oscar-nominated feature documentary, *Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience*, and a book, *Operation Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front, in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families*, edited by Andrew Carroll with a preface by Gioia, in which such writing workshop teachers as Tobias Wolff, Bobbie Ann Mason, Barry Hannah, and Marilyn Nelson lent a hand. In that book appeared "Taking Chance," a personal narrative by Lieutenant Colonel Michael R. Strobl, who wrote about his journey in accompanying the body of PFC Chance Phelps from Dover Air Force Base in Delaware to his final resting place in his hometown of Dubois, Wyoming. That personal narrative was among the sources consulted for the widely acclaimed 2009 movie *Taking Chance,* starring Kevin Bacon as Strobl.

Still another NEA program begun or bolstered by Gioia is the Jazz Masters Fellowships. If jazz is America's true original music, then "Dana Gioia, head of the National Endowment for the Arts, . . . has done far more for this music than any of his

predecessors," states eminent jazz critic and historian Nat Hentoff ("Expanding the Map," *JazzTimes* 98). He was not the lone *JazzTimes* writer to sing Gioia's praises for his unprecedented support of jazz. Equally esteemed jazz critic and historian Gary Giddins noted that

> as chairman for the National Endowment for the Arts, Gioia revived a moribund institution not least by revving up its involvement in jazz. When the Jazz Masters program began in 1982, it honored three artists per year. After taking over in 2003, Gioia doubled that number (sometimes bringing it to seven), increased the prize money[120] to make it a meaningful honor, and added a category for jazz-enabling non-musicians, . . . and instigated touring, educational and archival programs. ("Jump for Gioia," *JazzTimes* 18)

In that same issue another *JazzTimes* contributing writer, Bill Milkowski, reviewed the 2009 NEA Jazz Masters Awards Ceremony and Concert at New York City's Lincoln Center and called the event, where Gioia spoke on stage, "the jazz world's equivalent to the Academy Awards" ("Jazz Oscars" 29).

Perhaps the last line of Gioia's long narrative poem "Haunted" in *Pity the Beautiful* sums up his own work best: "This is the life I didn't want to waste" (42). A biblical parallel to it is below, befitting his deepest beliefs about spirituality, literature, and other arts:

> And though the Lord gives you

[120] By the time Gioia resigned as NEA chairman on February 1, 2009, he had raised that prize money to $25,000 for each honoree. He did the same for folk or traditional artists who won National Heritage Fellowships.

> The bread of adversity and the water of affliction,
>
> Yet your teachers will not be moved into a corner anymore,
>
> But your eyes shall see your teachers.
>
> Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying,
>
> "This is the way, walk in it." (*Life Application Bible: New King James Version,* Isa. 30:21, 1225)

Poet, literary critic, and public arts advocate Dana Gioia heard that word uttered behind him, found the way, and walked in it.

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Drew University	Madison, NJ	Doctor of Letters	2015