Don’t Care for Poetry?

Read this anyway

By Bruce Bawer

This is going to be about poetry, but please don’t let that keep you from reading it. In fact the whole point of the piece, if you’ll allow me to jump to my conclusion at the outset, is that hardly anybody today cares for contemporary

poetry, and that there are very good reasons for that, but that it’s a lousy state of affairs that — as the poetry of people like Dana Gioia, the subject of an engaging new book of critical essays, demonstrates — can and should be changed.

It’s hard to believe today that once upon a time, poetry was wildly popular. For centuries, and right up until the mid 20th century, virtually every literate person in the English-speaking world not only read it but knew a lot of it by heart. And they didn’t just read in school. They read it at home, during their leisure time, to acquire wisdom, to experience a sense of exaltation, or, quite simply, to fill an hour or two with sheer pleasure. In a 1988 *Commentary* essay, “Who Killed Poetry?”, Joseph Epstein recalled being “taught that poetry was itself an exalted thing. No literary genre was closer to the divine than poetry; in no other craft could a writer soar

as he could in a poem."

But back in the day – before the modernist movement came along and transformed not only literature but music and art as well – what mattered was that most of the great poets, soar though they did, rarely soared beyond the level of comprehension of ordinary readers. Parents read these poets' works aloud to their spouses and children by candlelight. In the 19th century, the British poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-92) became a household name throughout the English-speaking world because of poems like "Crossing the Bar" (1889):

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crossed the bar.

Another household name was the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-82), the first of whose ten stanzas of "My Lost Youth" (1855) read as follows:

Often I think of the beautiful town
That is seated by the sea;

Often in thought go up and down
The pleasant streets of that dear old town,
And my youth comes back to me.
And a verse of a Lapland song
Is haunting my memory still:
“A boy’s will is the world’s will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.”

And then there’s this one, “The Man He Killed,” by my favorite poet, Thomas Hardy (1840-1928):

“Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin [a small amount of alcohol]!

“But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place.

“I shot him dead because –
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That’s clear enough; although

“He thought he’d ‘list [i.e., enlist], perhaps,
Off-hand like – just as I –
Was out of work – had sold his traps –
No other reason why.

“Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You’d treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a-crown.”

Briefly put, poets like Tennyson and Longfellow and Hardy wrote about things that anybody could relate to – in the case

of these three poems, respectively, contemplating one's mortality, looking back fondly on one's youth, and pondering the absurdity of war.

They wrote brilliantly – but accessibly.

Poetic fame didn't end with the nineteenth century. As late as 1950, Robert Frost was on the cover of *Time* Magazine. And quite a few ordinary people knew some of Frost's poems by heart:

> *Whose woods these are I think I know.*
> *His house is in the village though;*
> *He will not see me stopping here*
> *To watch his woods fill up with snow….*

But times have changed. Why? Well, for one thing, the modernist movement stole poetry from the people and turned it into something of, by, and for an elite. Ordinary readers had long associated poetry with rhyme and meter and storytelling. They expected poems to be understandable. To be about things that they could relate to. And to touch their hearts, make them think, or even evoke a chuckle.

To a massive extent, the modernists, who came along early in the 20th century, rejected all that. Many of them eschewed rhyme and meter. Many dismissed coherence and embraced obscurity. They weren't writing for the general public; they were writing to demonstrate their intelligence and sophistication, writing to impress one another – along with an ever-shrinking audience of intellectual types – with recondite statements and erudite references. Am I exaggerating here? Not really. Nor am I putting them all down. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) is, after all, a great poem – widely, and arguably, considered the greatest of the twentieth century. But as you can see from the opening lines, it's hardly something you'd read to your kiddies:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.
Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.
And when we were children, staying at the archduke's,
My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.
In the mountains, there you feel free.
I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

At the opposite extreme from Eliot, in terms of complexity, was another leading modernist, William Carlos Williams, whose most famous poem, "The Red Wheelbarrow" (1938), reads, in its entirety, as follows:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

As students we were encouraged to consider this a masterpiece.

I never got it. I felt I was being played. (I feel the same way about the paintings of Mark Rothko.)

Anyway, first came Eliot and Williams and company. Then something else happened. Sometime around the mid twentieth century, poetry, which had once been created by free spirits almost all of whom tended to make their living by other means (Eliot was a banker, Williams a pediatrician), became captured by the academy. It became professionalized, bureaucratized. And so it remains.

It works this way: you go to college to study creative writing, with a specialization in poetry. You take classes that are called "workshops," a word that implies acquiring a set of rote mechanical skills that will enable you to create a standardized product suitable for sale to a certain customer base. You're taught by a professor who has published at least a book or two of poetry.

No, his books probably haven't sold much. His poems probably aren't too impressive. But they've been published by editors whom he's cultivated and they've been glowingly reviewed by other poets whom he studied poetry with or whom he's befriended at poetry conferences or poetry readings or literary parties. After you graduate, the only career available to you is a career like his – as a professor of creative writing, teaching poetry writing to the next generation.

It isn't entirely unfair to call it something of a scam, especially given how much it costs to go to college these days.

A certain kind of poetry results from this regimented process. It's in free verse. It tends to be autobiographical. And it tends to be easy to write. Williams, with minimalist poems like "The Red Wheelbarrow," has now served as a role model for generations of workshop poets. If this poem has been touted

for nearly a century as a towering example of American literature, how hard can it be for a novice undergraduate to write a great poem?

When I first went to college in the 1970s, I knew nothing of all this. I'd always loved poetry – Wordsworth, Keats, Browning, Hardy. The old guys. The masters. Then I took a course in modern poetry. Perusing the anthology, I couldn't believe some of what I was looking at – especially a lot of the stuff toward the end. Sample: "A Poem for Speculative Hipsters," a 1964 effort by Amiri Baraka, which reads in its entirety:

> *He had got, finally,*
> *to the forest*
> *of motives. There were no*
> *owls, or hunters. No Connie Chatterleys*
> *resting beautifully*
> *on their backs, having casually*
> *brought socialism*
> *to England.*
> *Only ideas,*
> *and their opposites.*
> *Like,*
> *he was really*
> *nowhere.*

What?

After reading this piece of rubbish and a few other relatively recent poems of the same ilk, I had a stratagem. First, I typed out three or four of the less impressive poems from the anthology. Then, without putting any particular effort or feeling into it, I quickly banged out two or three "poems" of my own composed in much the same manner. Passing the pages around to the guys in my dormitory, I asked them to guess which ones I had copied from the anthology and which ones I

had just now concocted on the fly. Nobody guessed right.

You might argue that, well, these were teenagers without any literary background. They didn't major in English but in sociology or physics or whatever. But in the old days, your ordinary literate teenager would've known the difference between a real poem that had made it into the canon and some cockamamie piece of deliberate garbage that some wiseguy had just thrown together.

Decades after I pulled that little stunt, the poetry scene remains the same. Poets once had their own voices: now the most celebrated of them sound amazingly alike. It's possible, moreover, to read through a pile of new poetry collections, or a recent issue of a poetry magazine, without encountering a single example of rhyme or meter.

One reason for this is that the use of traditional forms is widely equated in poetry circles with being a political reactionary. Women who write in form are accused of betraying feminism. Minorities who do so are charged with betraying their ethnic groups. By contrast, women and minorities who lean into their group identities (and grievances) can go a long way in the poetry game. So can those whose poems are drenched with leftist ideology, whatever those poems' aesthetic merits.

And what has been the principal consequence of these changes in the poetry scene? Simple: poetry has lost its audience. True, the number of poets and poems and poetry journals (both online and offline) has proliferated; but the number of poetry readers has severely diminished. So alienated is modern poetry not just from the general public but, believe it or not, from *people who make a living reading and writing* that when I was on the board of the National Book Critics Circle more than three decades ago, several of my fellow board members, including veteran literary critics and people who'd worked for years as book-review editors for major newspapers or magazines

and who had very strong opinions on the finalists for the fiction, history, biography, and other prizes, chose not to weigh in on the books under consideration for the poetry prize, because, as they readily admitted, *they just didn't get it.* Yes, nowadays even literary critics can't make head or tail of most contemporary poetry. But there are exceptions.

There are poets –many if not most of whom operate outside of the academy – who dare to violate the current academic rules. The late 1970s saw the rise of a movement called the New Formalism, whose members sought, among other things, to return poetry to the people – to, as a certain politician might put it, the deplorables.

Among those poets was Vikram Seth, who, years before publishing his international bestseller *A Suitable Boy* (1993), made waves with *The Golden Gate,* a brilliant 1986 novel in verse about a love-starved Bay Area Yuppie; although composed in the challenging and complex stanza form invented by the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin for his 1833 masterwork *Eugene Onegin,* it was a fun, easy, and immensely charming read that appealed to a large audience of young adults most of whom probably hadn't looked at a poem in years. Here's the eighth of its 490 stanzas:

> *He goes home, seeking consolation*
> *Among old Beatles and Pink Floyd –*
> *But "Girl" elicits mere frustration,*
> *While "Money" leaves him more annoyed.*
> *Alas, he hungers less for money*
> *Than for a fleeting Taste of Honey.*
> *Murmuring, "Money – it's a gas! …*
> *The lunatic is on the grass,"*
> *He pours himself a beer. Desires*
> *And reminiscences intrude*
> *Upon his unpropitious mood*
> *Until he feels that he requires*
> *A one-way Ticket to Ride – and soon –*

Across the Dark Side of the Moon.

Other New Formalists included the highly gifted Martin, Phillis Levin, Frederick Turner, and Molly Peacock, all of whom are still active. And let's not forget the late, great Tom Disch, who, while most famous as a science-fiction novelist, was also a highly gifted and endlessly witty poet of whose work the following sonnet, "Bookmark," is a representative sample:

Four years ago I started reading Proust.
Although I'm past the halfway point, I still
Have seven hundred pages of reduced
Type left before I reach the end. I will
Slog through. It can't get much more dull than what
Is happening now: he's buying crepe de chine
Wraps and a real, well-documented hat
For his imaginary Albertine.
Oh, what a slimy sort he must have been –
So weak, so sweetly poisonous, so fey!
Four years ago, by God! – and even then
How I was looking forward to the day
I would be able to forgive, at last,
And to forget Remembrance of Things Past.

Tom was a genius – an inventive sf novelist and a top-notch writer of what some people would call light verse. His poems not only were funny but also made a big difference in reintroducing poetry readers to traditional forms.

But the name most strongly identified with the New Formalist movement was that of Dana Gioia.

It was Dana, as it happened, who introduced me to most of the other New Formalists. He's now 73, but when I first knew him he was, as they say, a "promising young poet" who'd been raised in a working-class family in Hawthorne, California, and

who'd studied comparative literature (not creative writing) at Harvard and earned an MBA at Stanford. He'd gone on to combine a career as a New York corporate executive with that of a poet and critic whose work appeared regularly in places like *The New Yorker* and *Poetry.* Later he served under George W. Bush as chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. Over the years he's published several collections of poetry as well as the influential book of criticism *Can Poetry Matter?* (1992), in which the title essay's thesis is spelled out at the outset:

> *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…..What makes the situation of contemporary poetry particularly surprising is that it comes at a moment of unprecedented expansion for the art. There have never before been so many new books of poetry published, so many anthologies or literary magazines….There are now several thousand college-level jobs in teaching creative writing, and many more at the primary and secondary level.*

But all this activity, he continues, happens in a clubby bubble: "a 'famous' poet now means someone famous only to other poets." And inside that bubble, everybody's helping to promote everybody else, whatever the quality of their work. Dana quotes Robert Bly: "Although more bad poetry is being published now than ever before in American history, most of the reviews are positive." Plus, as Dana puts it in "My Confessional Sestina," a poem from *The Gods of Winter* (1991), a lot of "kids in workshops" tend to "care less about being poets than contributors." Later in the same poem, he asks:

> *Where will it end? This grim cycle of workshops*
> *churning out poems for little magazines*
> *no one honestly finds to their taste?*

From the outset of his career, Dana has fervently believed in reintroducing poetry to the common reader. He also believes that in order for the common reader to care about poetry, poets need to emphasize quality over quantity, need to review one another honestly, need to ignore the current poetic trends and chart their own courses, need to stop demonizing meter, rhyme, and narrative, and need to stop awarding one another each other brownie points for political correctness, a phenomenon that Dana first observed during his own college days:

> *I noticed that most of my teachers—professors and graduate students alike—talked most comfortably about contemporary poetry when they could reduce it to ideology. The Beats espoused political, moral, and social revolution; hence they deserved attention. The feminists demanded a fundamental revision of traditional sexual identities; therefore their poetry became important….I found it hard to consider Ginsberg or Ferlinghetti revolutionary when I first encountered them as classroom texts in an elite private university. To me they represented the conventional values—most of which, incidentally, I accepted—of the establishment I had just entered.*

Over the years, Dana has increasingly been the subject of essays declaring him one of the major poets of his generation. It has been fascinating and gratifying to watch my old friend win the praise he deserves, even in a time when poetry of the sort he writes – and advocates for – is considered old hat, if not politically incorrect. Now Mercer University Press has issued a substantial compendium of critical essays entitled *Dana Gioia: Poet and Critic,* edited by John Zheng and Jon Parrish Peede. I don't plan here to review this book, but rather to use its publication as an opportunity to celebrate Dana's poetic *oeuvre* and to present a few excerpts from that *oeuvre* that might make some readers, at least, reconsider their antipathy for poetry.

How to sum up a Dana Gioia poem? Although his poetry exhibits a wide range in subject and tone and form (much of it, for example, doesn't rhyme), it's possible to make certain generalizations. To read him is, quite often, to encounter wistfulness and regret, a deep awareness of lost time and lost chances, and an abiding awareness that our seemingly quotidian existences – going off to work, dealing with the usual day-long drudgery, and then dragging ourselves home to dinner – take place in a world of wonder and beauty that we too often fail to recognize. Here's the first half of his poem "Cruising with the Beach Boys," which appeared in his first collection, *Daily Horoscope* (1986):

So strange to hear that song again tonight
Travelling on business in a rented car
Miles from anywhere I've been before.
And now a tune I haven't heard for years
Probably not since it last left the charts
Back in L.A. in 1969.
I can't believe I know the words by heart
And can't think of a girl to blame them on.

Every lovesick summer has its song,
And this one I pretended to despise,
But if I was alone when it came on,
I turned it up full-blast to sing 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.

Here, in a couple of snappily turned stanzas, Dana captures a character, a setting, a mood, depicting a situation with which many a reader who has ever been young can identify. As Robert McPhillips of blessed memory, definitely the most devoted and arguably the most discerning champion of Dana's poetry, points out in what is deservedly the opening essay in the Mercer

Press collection, “Cruising,” like many other New Formalist poems, “seems to walk a middle path” between “the more emotionally distanced lyrics of the academic formalists” of the previous generation (Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht) and “the more turbulently emotional lyrics of the Beats and the Confessionals” (Allen Ginsberg, Robert Lowell), exhibiting at once “the formal reserve of the first and the colloquialism of the second.”

Here, too, as in the work of other New Formalists, writes McPhillips, “the cadences of ordinary American speech align themselves with iambic pentameter, to which they conform without any strain or any strong metrical substitutions.” In other words, Dana uses form here without making it seem stiff or forced or artificial; and it’s his ability to employ form so effectively and naturally here that, in large part, distinguishes it from the kind of slack, witless free-verse narrative on a similar subject that one can imagine any number of poetry workshop graduates churning out.

“Cruising” is one of many California poems in Dana’s *oeuvre* – not surprising given that he grew up in the L.A. area and has now lived for many years in Santa Rosa. He’s also written a number of poems set in the northern suburbs of New York, where he lived during his years as a businessman. This is, needless to say, a corner of the world that has been mercilessly mocked in American literature for generations, treated as a place to which Manhattan’s soul-dead corporate suckers retreat for a few hours at the end of the day to grab some shut-eye and get a quick glimpse of their families before waking up early in the morning to head back to the Big Apple and resume their maleficent capitalist machinations. In poems like “In Cheever Country,” however, Dana finds beauty in “this landscape no one takes too seriously,” a place of pine forests and streams dotted by small commuter towns that he invites us to view “[t]hrough the rattling / grime-streaked windows” of a commuter train. At one stop,

The sunset broadens for a moment, and the passengers
standing on the platform turn strangely luminous
In the light streaming from the Palisades across the river.
Some board the train. Others greet their arrivals,
shaking hands and embracing in the dusk.

If there is an afterlife, let it be a small town
gentle as this spot at just this instant.
But the car doors close, and the bright crowd,
unaware of its election, disperses to the small
pleasures of the evening. The platform falls behind.

And here's the ending:

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.

Unsurprisingly, Dana was attacked by many members of the poetry community for celebrating these upscale suburbs with their privileged residents. Many of his critics surely lived in college towns no less charming than the Westchester suburbs, and surely reveled in their good fortune – but to write poems in which they admitted to appreciating their lives in these places was *verboten.* You're supposed to write about less fortunate people and less pleasant places, about the evils of late capitalism and economic inequality, and about how America is full of suffering victims of financial exploitation by people like those "luminous" passengers.

I don't expect that very many readers of FrontPage are interested in buying an entire collection of essays about Dana Gioia. But I'd strongly suggest you give his poetry a look. He's published six full-length collections. Try the first, *Daily Horoscope.* Or his *99 Poems: New and*

Selected (2016). And if you like them, consider sampling some of the other New Formalists I've mentioned. I assure you, they'll give you a kind of sustenance that you desperately need if you spend a lot of your time having your soul gradually shriveled by online political writing and political podcasts.

While I'm definitely one of those people whose online diet is heavily weighted toward such fare – and who, admittedly, spends a lot of time contributing to it – I know that when I spend some time with first-rate poetry of the sort that Dana Gioia writes, it does something good for my spirit, lifting me up beyond the passing, perplexing, and painful preoccupations of the day and pointing me toward the eternal questions. It does, in short, what poetry used to do for literate people for centuries, before the advent of modernism and the academic poetry workshop. The publication of Mercer University Press's *Dana Gioia: Poet and Critic* is a small but encouraging sign that serious but accessible poetry may yet find its way back into ordinary American households – and into the hearts, minds, and souls of common readers.

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