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Book Notes #155

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Dana Gioia: Poet with an MBA



This is going to be a shorter **Note** (I can almost hear my editors Judy, Ben, and Pat murmuring “*Sure...*”); in fact, it’s going to be a **Note of Notes**. After three lengthy, prosy **Notes** about “Sports and the Quest for Women’s Rights,” and before delving into “Sports and The Immigrant’s Tale,” seeking not respite but refreshment, I dipped into several books I own by the poet Dana Gioia. You might recall that I mentioned his poem “Money” last week in a passing slap at the NCAA, an eminently slap-worthy organization.

Setting the NCAA aside, reading Gioia, recalling how I first met and heard of him, and re-reading his work, triggered a Lewis Carroll-*ish* unspooling of thoughts, some of which ripened into ideas both old and new. Not unlike Alice, as my thoughts tumbled down the resulting rabbit-hole, I grabbed at a ledge, caught my fall, and sorted those rushing impressions into four or five clusters, each of which will be today's *Notes* within this **Note**. And each of which will serve as the focus of a full-length **Note** (or series of *Notes*) as we move into Fall, then Winter, and then Spring, again.

Note #1: Who is Dana Gioia, and why is he worthy of your notice?

Dana Gioia is a poet with an M.B.A. He earned a B.A. and M.B.A. from Stanford and an M.A. in Comparative Literature from Harvard. An accomplished poet, critic, and librettist, Gioia was also a highly successful business executive before turning to a life of poetry and the arts. He has been described as the most successful director of the National Endowment for the Arts, a position for which he was nominated by President George W. Bush. Before that Gioia was the Vice-President of Marketing for General Foods, part of the team that invented Jell-O Jigglers. [1]

As a businessman writing poetry, Gioia's in good company. Wallace Stevens was an insurance executive, T.S. Eliot a banker, and the only verifiable signatures of one William Shakespeare are on legal documents and real estate deeds. "Billy-Boy," as a professor of mine liked to call him, was also part-owner of a theater.

I first met Gioia at a conference in March 2011 at Johns Hopkins University on "The Future of the Humanities." He snagged my notice because, admittedly, we share some biases. Gioia thinks a poem should be an invitation to a shared experience. Similarly, seeking a shared experience, a poem should be written in clear, lucid language. As for example, in his "Words":

from Words

The world does not need words. It articulates itself
in sunlight, leaves, and shadows. The stones on the path
are no less real for lying uncatalogued and uncounted.
The fluent leaves speak only the dialect of pure being.
The kiss is still fully itself though no words were spoken.

And one word transforms it into something less or other –
illicit, chaste, perfunctory, conjugal, covert.
Even calling it a kiss betrays the fluster of hands
glancing on the skin or gripping a shoulder, the slow
arching of neck or knee, the silent touching of tongues. [2]

A self-proclaimed “Catholic poet,” Gioia rejects the overtly solipsistic tone of the confessional poets. Confessional poetry, which dominated the mid-20th century, focuses on life’s extreme moments through the lens of the poet’s personal experience. It’s all about “I” – the dance of the poet’s ego. At its best, as for example in the work of W.D. Snodgrass and to a lesser extent Anne Sexton, it can be powerful. But as it became the voice of mid-century American verse, in the hands of inferior poets, it often descended into a whinnying, marginally coherent, egoistic whine. While rejecting that excess, Gioia, in a calm and lucid manner, shares his deeply felt personal experience. As for example, consider “Prayer,” the very first poem in his collection *The Gods of Winter*. The book is dedicated to the memory of his late son – “briefest of joys, our life together.”

Prayer

Echo of the clocktower, footstep
in the alleyway, sweep
of the wind sifting the leaves.

Jeweller of the spiderweb, connoisseur
of autumn’s opulence, blade of lightning
harvesting the sky.

Keeper of the small gate, choreographer
of entrances and exits, midnight
whisper travelling the wires.

Seducer, healer, deity or thief,
I will see you soon enough –
in the shadow of the rainfall,

in the brief violet darkening a sunset –
but until then I pray watch over him
as a mountain guards its covert ore

and the harsh falcon its flightless young. [3]

Note #2: What is the difference between the New Formalism and confessional poetry?

As readers of these **Book Notes** know, last spring I wrote four or five **Notes** about ChatGPT4 and what it might mean for the future of scholarship. If one understood that “Chat” might make mistakes and even “hallucinate” an answer (i.e., just make it up rather than admit it didn’t know) and one was prepared to

crosscheck and correct it, then “Chat” could prove valuable as a virtual graduate assistant.

So, I asked “Chat” to define confessional poetry. It did. Based on my knowledge, “Chat’s” answer, while only a beginning, is reasonably accurate. Confessional poetry proceeds from “a first-person narrative and involves personal relationships, taboo topics, honesty, and intensity.” In the hands of masters like Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and others, “it can be quite effective as it divulges matters of mental illness, sexuality, trauma, and failed relationships.” It makes the poet’s own life the central subject of its poetry, treating topics such as suicide, depression, and matters of deep intimacy with raw frankness and emotional intensity. At its worst, however, it can be over-indulgent. Rather than “offer universal truths it can just wallow in self-pity.” The work of these poets often “lack craft” and “indulge in excessive shock value.” [4]

Generally, if I think a poem, any work of art, unworthy, I just ignore it. I don’t like to criticize any poet – anyone willing to share themselves with the world deserves respect for the courage of their convictions. Kim Addonizio’s poetry, for example, some of which I find quite fine, always leaves me wondering if she is onto something or just posing. Here is her “What Do Women Want?”

“What Do Women Want?”

I want a red dress.
I want it flimsy and cheap,
I want it too tight, I want to wear it
until someone tears it off me.
I want it sleeveless and backless,
this dress, so no one has to guess
what’s underneath. I want to walk down
the street past Thrifty’s and the hardware store
with all those keys glittering in the window,
past Mr. and Mrs. Wong selling day-old
donuts in their café, past the Guerra brothers
slinging pigs from the truck and onto the dolly,
hoisting the slick snouts over their shoulders.
I want to walk like I’m the only
woman on earth and I can have my pick.
I want that red dress bad.
I want it to confirm
your worst fears about me,
to show you how little I care about you
or anything except what
I want. When I find it, I’ll pull that garment

from its hanger like I'm choosing a body
to carry me into this world, through
the birth-cries and the love-cries too,
and I'll wear it like bones, like skin,
it'll be the goddamned
dress they bury me in. [5]

When I asked a woman – no shrinking violet – whose judgment I respect what she made of the poem, she said it sounded “inauthentic,” like a pose, like something the poet wanted to think she might do but probably never did or will.

I agree.

A poet lacking authenticity is a contradiction in terms. In response to confessional poetry's dominance in the middle-third of the 20th century, in the latter part of the century a movement called the New Formalism arose. Dana Gioia was one of its champions. It incurred the wrath of the poet and critic Diane Wakoski, who wrote a scathing essay attacking “The New Conservatism in American Poetry,” whose “use of traditional poetic form betrayed a Eurocentric blindness and emotional insecurity.” [6]

What did the New Formalists avow that so knotted Wakoski's shorts? They advocated for a “return to traditional poetic forms, such as sonnets and villanelles, as well as a general adherence to meter and rhyme.” It was a reaction against free verse; it valued structure's ability to “enhance meaning, musicality, and memorability.” [7] It valued coherence over cacophony.

Among New Formalism champions were Dana Gioia and Molly Peacock. We've already heard from Gioia, here is an example of Peacock's work.

A Face, a Cup

The thousand hairline cracks in an aged face
match the hairline cracks in an aged cup
and come from similar insults: careless, base
self-absorbed gestures from a younger face,
cruel and fine. Bang! Each disturbed trace
deepens to a visible crack. A break-up,
a mix-up, a wild mistake: these show in a face
like the hairline cracks in an ancient cup.

Neither wholly broken nor all used up
the cup becomes a visage, unstable.
One never knows what will crack it open

and finish it. Banged too hard on a table?
Yet happiness might crack a face open
in a better way: hairline tracery as laugh lines
releasing the joys of ancient thoughts
cupped into use, and suddenly able. [8]

Note #3: If the New Formalists want to share an experience in clean, lucid language, and “the confessors” (for lack of a better descriptor) want to drag us inside their personal ego dance through sheer emotional intensity, what has either to do with my essential poetic notion that the job of a poet is to help us be more “**present-to-the-present**,” to awaken us, as Katharine Rundell said of John Donne, to the “*is-that-is*.” [9] Although an artist in any medium can’t entirely escape their *self* – after all, they have a point of view, they choose the words or colors or sounds – in its essence, in their work they want to share with us something they’ve *seen*. “Seen” here meaning not only their visual experience, but the totality of their experience including what they’ve literally “seen” but also heard, thought, felt, or intuited. Their aim ought to be to transcend their *self*, and having seen that “*is-that-is*,” share it with us so cleanly that we can experience it, too. In sharing, they ought not tell us about it, but make it so real, so present, that we “see” it, too.

A not entirely satisfactory example comes to mind. Elizabeth Bishop, who was Dana Gioia’s teacher at Harvard, transcended her “confessional” bent by attending closely to meter and structure. She was a kind of New Formalist/confessional hybrid, if you will. As in her poem “Filling Station”:

Filling Station

Oh, but it is dirty!
—this little filling station,
oil-soaked, oil-permeated
to a disturbing, over-all
black translucency.
Be careful with that match!

Father wears a dirty,
oil-soaked monkey suit
that cuts him under the arms,
and several quick and saucy
and greasy sons assist him
(it’s a family filling station),
all quite thoroughly dirty.

Do they live in the station?

It has a cement porch
behind the pumps, and on it
a set of crushed and grease-
impregnated wickerwork;
on the wicker sofa
a dirty dog, quite comfy.

Some comic books provide
the only note of color—
of certain color. They lie
upon a big dim doily
draping a taboret
(part of the set), beside
a big hirsute begonia.

Why the extraneous plant?
Why the taboret?
Why, oh why, the doily?
(Embroidered in daisy stitch
with marguerites, I think,
and heavy with gray crochet.)

Somebody embroidered the doily.
Somebody waters the plant,
or oils it, maybe. Somebody
arranges the rows of cans
so that they softly say:
ESSO—SO—SO—SO
to high-strung automobiles.
Somebody loves us all. [10]

Although the author's "I" is suppressed, it is still there insinuating its opinions. Still, Bishop brings the Esso station to life with her detailed observations revealing the emotional depth in even this mundane snapshot of American life. But that sly "I" still persists. With its implied value judgments, it intrudes between us and the Esso station.

More to the point I want to make is Edward Hopper's "Gas." Now, I am switching mediums here – language to visual – and that might not be fair to Bishop. Like Hopper, she transformed the ordinary into the extraordinary. Although visual artists have their point-of-view, beginning most basically with what they include and what they leave out, still, if the point is to help one be more **present-to-the-present**, then Hopper's "Gas," with its clean and precise

quality, shares an experience letting us make of it what we will. Hopper does what great artists do – he does not *tell*, he *shows*.



Edward Hopper "Gas" (1940)

Note #4: Now, you might say that is grossly unfair. Poets, who by their very nature are language-bound, "*tell*," while a painting by its very nature "*shows*." And you might quickly and correctly point out that visual artists have their own "vocabulary" that "tells," such as point-of-view, perspective, tonality, color and shading, light and dark. And you would be correct. These are only *Notes* for future **Book Notes**, so I'll not parse that objection now except to ask, "What has Zen to do with poetry?"

To which the answer is: everything.

If the job of a poet – or any artist – is to help us be more **present-to-present**, then almost by definition any artist who succeeds in doing so is a Zen master. In two wonderful books I am now just reading, R.H. Blyth reveals the truth of that observation. For years, I have used the phrase "more **present-to-present**" as a pointer to my general aesthetic without making any claims to understanding Zen much less being in any sense a competent Zen student. (In my own half-assed way, I have studied Zen for years and am still seeking that "beginner's mind"). In his ***Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*** and ***Poetry and Zen: Letters and Uncollected Writings***, Blyth makes it all come clear. It's too vast a topic for a *Note* within a **Book Note**. We'll explore it further in future **Book Notes**.

To close this *Note*, I'll ask and try to answer, "How can the poet, trapped, as the Buddha once allegedly described it, in 'the treacherous world of words,' *show* and not *tell*?"

First, Basho's:

Along the mountain path,
The scent of plum-blossoms, --
And, on a sudden, the rising sun! [11]

More words, but no intruding authorial "I", Shakespeare's description of winter:

Winter

When icicles hang by the wall,

And Dick the shepherd blows his nail, (blows his nail: blows on his hands to warm them)
And Tom bears logs into the hall,
And milk comes frozen home in pail,
When blood is nipp'd and ways be foul,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
 Tu-whit;
Tu-who, a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot. (keel: to stir)

When all aloud the wind doth blow,
And coughing drowns the parson's saw, (coughing parishioners drown out the preacher)
And birds sit brooding in the snow,
And Marion's nose looks red and raw,
When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
 Tu-whit;
Tu-who, a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.
 from *Love's Labor's Lost* V, ii, ll. 912-929

Or William Carlos Williams'

from Winter Trees

... having prepared their buds
against a sure winter
the wise trees
stand sleeping in the cold. [12]

Last Note: I said I'd keep this short, so, I'll conclude by bringing us back to the poetry of Dana Gioia and the poem I referenced earlier as a slap at the money-grubbing NCAA:

Money

Money is a kind of poetry.
Wallace Stevens

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.
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. [13]

And, as even the most casual glance at the day's news reveals, people *listen!*



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"Dana Gioia: California's new poet laureate wants to preach the power of poetry across the state" at LAist Morning Edition December 7, 2015 at KPCC 89.3FM available at [California's new poet laureate wants to preach the power of poetry across the state | LAist - NPR News for Southern California - 89.3 FM \(kpcc.org\)](https://www.kpcc.org/news/2015/12/07/dana-gioia-california-s-new-poet-laureate-wants-to-preach-the-power-of-poetry-across-the-state/) accessed August 25, 2023.

"Hopper-Gas-1940.png" at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:Hopper-Gas-1940.png - Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hopper-Gas-1940.png) accessed August 21, 2023.

End Notes

1. Goodyear, Dana. *"The Moneyed Muse: What can two hundred million dollars do for poetry?"* **The New Yorker** (February 11, 2007) available at [The Moneyed Muse | The New Yorker](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007-02-12/the-moneyed-muse) accessed August 20, 2023.
2. Gioia, Dana. "Words" in **Interrogations at Noon** (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2001), p. 3.
3. Gioia, Dana. "Prayer" in **The Gods of Winter** (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1991), p. 3.
4. All direct and indirect quotations from ChatGPT4 are from my personal account at [OpenAI.com](https://openai.com)

5. Addonizio, Kim. "What Do Women Want?" at **Academy of American Poets** available at ["What Do Women Want?" by Kim Addonizio - Poems | Academy of American Poets](#) accessed August 20, 2023.
6. Cf. McDowell, Robert, "Expansive Poetry: A Brief History" in **The Sewanee Review**, V. 109, N. 1 (Winter, 2001), p.120.
7. All quotations direct and indirect from ChatGPT4 are from my personal account at [OpenAI.com](#)
8. Peacock, Molly. "A Face, a Cup" at **Academy of American Poets** available at [A Face, a Cup by Molly Peacock - Poems | Academy of American Poets](#) accessed August 20, 2023.
9. Always dangerous (and a bit self-indulgent) to quote oneself, but cf. **Book Note #127** "The Seeker Seeking" (January, 2023) available at [BN #127.pdf \(jeserie.org\)](#) accessed August 20, 2023.
10. Bishop, Elizabeth, "Filling Station" at **Academy of American Poets** available at [Filling Station by Elizabeth Bishop - Poems | Academy of American Poets](#) accessed August 21, 2023.
11. Quoted in Blyth, R. H. **Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics** ((Kettering, OH: Angelico Press {an unabridged reprint of the first edition, The Hokuseido Press} 1942, 2015)), p. viii.
12. Williams, William Carlos. "Winter Trees". This poem is in the public domain.
13. Gioia, Dana. "Money" in **The Gods of Winter** (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1991), p. 33.

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