

## The Drama of Shaping a Lyrical Moment: An Approach to the Poetry of Dana Gioia

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Dana Gioia—poet, critic, librettist, arts administrator and anthologist—has been a public figure for well over two decades, having risen to national prominence with his *Atlantic Monthly* essay of 1991, “Can Poetry Matter?” and having served in the highly visible role of Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts from 2002 to 2009. Many of his poems demonstrate in practice what he asks for in his published criticism; namely, the deliberate and artful employment of the formal qualities of poetry which had seemingly disappeared from the craft of writing during major portions of the twentieth century, especially after 1950. As a result, he has long been associated with a “neoformalist” direction in poetry which is criticized by many for allegedly privileging form over content to the detriment of content and for practicing a kind of latter-day homage to pre-modernism: narrative but populist, conservative and hence not innovative.<sup>1</sup>

But it is reductive and downright inaccurate to limit Gioia’s achievement in poetry to formal or semi-formal verse or to assign it to a political ideology. Gioia writes, if formally, then generally in

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1 For Gioia’s own views of the subject, see his essay “Notes on the New Formalism” in *Can Poetry Matter?*, pp. 29-42. For critics of the movement and of its poets, see especially Jonathan Holden, who claims that New Formalism “produced elegant bottles without genies in them” (in Myers and Wojahn, 268), and Ira Sadoff, who criticizes Gioia’s choices as anthologist for excluding postmodern poets from his “masterpieces” (*History Matters*, 63-64). For a more balanced assessment, see Robert Thomas Archambeau, *Laureates and Heretics: Six Careers in American Poetry*.

a relaxed formal stricture, and if in free verse, then the kind that retains an ear for stress or meter. In this essay, I do not want to add one more voice to the debate over narrative in poetry. Rather, I wish to explore something new; that is, the affinities of Gioia's poetic work with the art of drama. Drama obeys formal rules, to be sure, but these rules are large, generous, and adaptable. Western culture since ancient Greece has absorbed certain basic patterns of drama into its cultural fiber. These patterns, which we recognize as parts of the way in which stories are told, accommodate themselves as readily to the complexities of grand opera as to soap opera and sitcom. Drama is capable of expressing something essentially human in Western culture by giving us an arc of narrative filled with tension that can give shape to the stories of our lives. At the same time, dramatic performance has been, since its beginnings, a site for the display of formal and ceremonial language; that is, poetry. This combination of large frame, large meaning, and carefully shaped language seems to me to be characteristic of Dana Gioia's poetry. Both on the expressive level of individual poems and on the organizational level of his volumes of poetry, Gioia avails himself of the properties of drama. Identifying the dramatic aspects of Gioia's poetic oeuvre may show us a way out of the impasse in the discussion over the merits of narrative, "expansive," or neoformal poetry.

## I

To set the stage, as it were, a bit of literary history and terminology is required.<sup>2</sup> The "New Formalists," as Gioia and fellow

2 For a helpful overview, see Robert McPhillips' *The New Formalism* (expanded edition, 2005). The Wikipedia article, "New Formalism," contains some interesting historical references but concludes with a largely irrelevant reference to an otherwise extremely good article by Marjorie Levinson in *PMLA* 2007, entitled "What is New Formalism?" Levinson's article does not deal with neoformalist poetry. Rather, it is a learned and extremely helpful review of two competing schools of **critical reading** and scholarship. She contrasts "new formalists" with "new historicists" and is less interested in practitioners of literature; i.e., poets, preferring to look instead at the battlegrounds of interpretation, in particular Renaissance and Early Modern studies.

practitioners came to be called—though nobody was ever quite happy with the term—returned for inspiration in particular to the long, metrical, and narrative poems of early and high modernist predecessors; for example E. A. Robinson, Robert Frost, and Robinson Jeffers. Yet anyone who reads Gioia, Tom Dish, or Rachel Hadas will immediately realize that seeking inspiration is not the same as being a mere poetic ephebe. These poets have lastingly expanded both the thematic range and the popular appeal of poetry outside of the academy. Some critics, such as Kevin Walzer or R. S. Gwynn,<sup>3</sup> have preferred the term “expansive poetry” for this kind of work in order to distinguish it from the traditionally short lyric poems that both confessional poets and the subsequent school of LANGUAGE poets had written. There remain, of course, contemporary “canonical” poets of the preceding half-generation who write form-consciously, such as Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, James Merrill, even Donald Hall, yet these—called “post-war formalists” by some<sup>4</sup>—were never subsumed under either the neoformalist or the expansive label.

What distinguishes the poorly named New Formalists from the two preceding generations of poets is, in my view, better described with a different image; namely, the contrast of centripetal and centrifugal forces of a poem. While the Confessional poets of the late fifties and sixties changed poetry radically, they did not—as is often asserted—do away with form. In following Allen Ginsberg, they loosened their formal commitment, to be sure, but Robert

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3 The adjective “expansive” has been defined in many and conflicting ways; for some, it means long rather than short poems, while for others it means a wide expanse of subject matter. See Gwynn, R. S. *New Expansive Poetry*, 1999, itself a revised edition of *Expansive Poetry*, ed. Frederick Feirstein 1989. This book unites two separate discussions; one about the potential of form to express aesthetic meaning, another on “The New Narrative,” an umbrella term for longer poems that tell stories instead of foregrounding lyrical moments. The lack of definitional specificity in “expansive” is probably an advantage, as it makes clear that the poetry of Gioia et al cannot be reduced merely to a formal feature.

4 See Bill Christopherson, “Review of James Schuyler, *Selected Poems*,” *Prairie Schooner* 64.4 (1990), p. 116.

Lowell, Anne Sexton, and their group still wrote metrical verse. The true revolution in confessional verse was the attempt, or posture, of eliminating the speaker of the poem. By suggesting or pretending that there was no speaker, confessional poets created texts in which the writer purports to speak directly to the reader. The “lyrical I” became the poet’s I. In Robert Lowell’s confessional poems we are supposed to hear Lowell speaking to us as unmediatedly as he spoke to his psychiatrist. The material of the poet’s life is mined for poetic subject matter. Thus, in confessional poetry the poet turns in on himself or herself, circling around the person of the poet rather than the persona of the poem, in ever-narrowing circles that probe the self of the speaker to the point of maddening self-revelation. This centripetal movement is then taken further, and somewhat diverted, in LANGUAGE poetry, as the poets turn away from obsessive interest in themselves and now allow their poems to be interested in themselves as poems. Thus, LANGUAGE poems could be characterized as yet more intensely centripetal, looking obsessively at the matter they are made out of, their words and their letters; and testing their possible permutations. The circles in which they move around themselves are so narrow that the poems often become hermetic and necessarily do not tell stories any longer. They become exercises for graduate poetry seminars instead of allowing the reader access to immediate reading pleasure.

The neoformalist revival is then an answer to the need for stories to be told. With “expansive” poetry, poems again were to be about something other than themselves; or, since all good poetry is in some measure also about poetry, poetry was now both to thematize itself and tell a story. Recognizable “speakers” re-entered the poetic world. These speakers don’t get “in the reader’s face” as closely as the speaker of a Lowell poem might.<sup>5</sup> Speakers remain at a certain distance from the individual reader, but as a result they may be appreciable by more readers. Even those who fail to share the depths of Lowell’s despair may still understand it. The depth

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5 See, for example, Robert Lowell’s “Night Sweat” with its famous equation, “my life’s fever is soaking in night sweat / one life, one writing!” *Collected Poems*, p. 375.

of emotional display is not hindered by a modicum of dramatic distance at all: we all understand Iago.

When we apply the criteria of literary genres, we see that poems that tell stories look across the fence, as it were, towards prose narrative, our traditional vehicle for telling tales. Poems that willingly cross the borders of their own genre know, with Frost, that “something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” in this case the artificial wall separating literary genres. And so it is that academic appreciation of Dana Gioia’s work<sup>6</sup> has taken a predictable direction: it speaks about stories he tells, is at pains to point out that these poems connect to the larger world, that they evoke sentiment and spirituality. Even Gioia’s highly personal poems, such as the ones talking about the loss of a baby son and other deeply intimate matter, are larger than themselves and manage to generalize precisely by telling stories. They reach out centrifugally instead of pointing inwards centripetally. Gioia’s many elegiac poems are not only, or not exclusively, about Gioia the man; they are about humanity. How do the poems do this? They do it by tone and address. First, Gioia is not afraid of sentiment, pathos, emotion, or direct appeal. Second, while Gioia knows how to poke fun at his own persona (“the Cecil B. DeMille of my self-pity” in “Cruising with the Beachboys” (*DH* 5-6); see also “My Confessional Sestina” (*GW* 31-32), he invites readers into his most transcendent moments with a “you”: “You are your own pale shadow in the quarter moon” he says in “Becoming a Redwood” (*GW* 55-56). His poems set readers free to sigh, to weep, to meditate, to test their value judgments, to recognize their own pains and perhaps joys in the scenes that are evoked. And with the word “scenes” I finally reach the heart of my argument.

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6 Wherever this paper quotes from Gioia’s poems, the volumes are abbreviated as follows: *Daily Horoscope: Poems*, referenced as *DH*; *The Gods of Winter: Poems*, referenced as *GW*; *Interrogations at Noon: Poems*, referenced as *IN*; and *Pity the Beautiful: Poems*, referenced as *PB*. All texts quoted with the author’s permission.

## II

The critical focus on narrative, though important, has obscured our view of the dramatic quality of much of Gioia's poetry. His poems look across the fence not just in the direction of prose narrative. They look also, and perhaps more strongly, to the other side, to drama. Many of Gioia's most characteristic poems achieve their lyrical effects with stage-like setting and theatrical props. The "mise-en-scène" of a Gioia poem contributes as much to its effect as the controlled use of meter, rhyme, and form. Examples include the numerous poems in which some spectator is watching a "performance"; I'll name some from each volume: "View from the Second Story" (*DH*), "The Homecoming" (*GW*), "The Voyeur" (who gazes from a treetop into his own bedroom) and "Summer Storm" (with its patio for a performance space) (both from *IN*), and "Haunted" (*PB*). If anything, Gioia's theatrical scenes as vessels for his poems have increased in prominence and intensity in his most recent volume, *Pity the Beautiful* (2012). Appreciating Gioia's work through its form and understanding that form not as ideology but as one aspect of its meaning and as a conduit towards its comprehension, my formal analysis in this paper looks not so much at the line, the traditional unit of poetry, as at the forms in which the poems are arranged and presented to the reader.

Gioia's world is theatrical; it is a world of performance. He loves the grand gesture of opera. He writes libretti. He is a practicing Roman Catholic, espousing a religion of which the dramatic celebration of mass is the centerpiece. As Gioia says in "Autumn Inaugural," "There will always be those who reject ceremony..." but the speaker defends rituals, "because it is not the rituals we honor / but our trust in what they signify" (*PB* 27). The distinction between the sign and the signified is clear to any linguist since Saussure, but it is also part of the Catholic and indeed the Thomistic tradition! Gioia was associated with the United States government—a big stage—and spearheaded dramatic community literacy projects like "The Big Read." He seeks to stage himself by projecting a public persona through a forceful and highly

sophisticated web presence, a masterpiece of literary marketing worthy of a former industry executive.<sup>7</sup> His essays, gentle as their prose may be, polarize. When he chose to translate a classical play into English, it was Seneca's *Hercules Furens*, the raging Hercules. In his introduction to the volume of Seneca translations by various hands, Gioia says something about the Iberian Stoic which I also read as applying to Gioia's own work: "Although his language can be complex, learned, and allusive, it is always carefully shaped for dramatic effect."<sup>8</sup> Except for vivid passages of *stichomythia*, *Hercules Furens* exposes its probing moral questions in—what else?—dramatic monologues. If we take the "dramatic" in "monologues" seriously, we will rediscover it in Gioia's work.

The presence of dramatic elements in the arrangement of Gioia's poetry in his four published volumes is so prominent that I am surprised no one seems to have called attention to it. If we approach Gioia's work conscious of its formal properties at the level of the individual poem, then we may also inspect the formal properties of his books, including typography. Dramatic features occur at the following four levels of his poetry: in the volumes' tables of contents, within individual poems, within and across an individual volume of poetry, and across the four volumes published so far. The tables of content of his four published volumes follow an identical pattern. First, there is the consistent formal division of every volume into five sections, each headed by a Roman numeral: this mimics the classical division of plays into five acts. Next, the titles of poems are set in small capitals throughout, a practice that recalls the traditional manner of indicating the speakers in a dramatic text.

Gioia's five numbered sections in each of his four volumes can be read as following the arc of tension and release that we would expect in classical drama: beginning with exposition and development in Acts I and II, leading to a climax in Act III, and followed by a retardation or refocusing of the key idea in Act IV, resulting in a resolution that brings us, changed, to the concluding

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7 See <<http://www.danagioia.net/>>.

8 Dana Gioia, "Introduction," in *Seneca: The Tragedies*, Vol. II, pp. vii-xliv.

insight or temporary holding place. To illustrate the dramatic arc within a single poem I will discuss a longer, narrative example as well as a shorter lyrical one below and conclude with a synoptic glance at all the volumes to date.

If we take the five numbered sections in each volume to be acts in a drama, then the individual poems in each section could be read as scenes. As poems, they are not conventional scenes that propel an action or a subplot. Rather, they function in the same way as do the constituent parts of opera. Operas conventionally tell stories, but in a compressed manner characteristically different from stage dramas in prose. Operas will alternate recitatives and arias, sections that advance the action interspersed with those that examine an emotion in detail. This organizing principle and this manner of scenically examining emotions, I posit, can be seen behind Gioia's poetry volumes.

Additionally, dramatic qualities adhere not just to the typographical arrangement but especially to the conceptual design of the poems. In a Gioia poem, the familiar concept of *peripeteia* is generally matched with the requisite *anagnorisis*, a discovery of something new or of a new insight into the self. And as in a good dramatic structure, even the catastrophe offers a glimpse of the new order: just as the dying Hamlet famously votes for Fortinbras to rule Denmark henceforth,<sup>9</sup> so Gioia's volumes link to each other, each final poem in a sequence reaching out a hand that is taken up by the first poem in the subsequent volume.<sup>10</sup> Finally, remember that Aristotle speaks in *Poetics* 1447.15 of tragedy as a form of *imitative poetry*: in Gioia, I claim, we have poetry imitating drama.

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9 Compare "Dramatic Structure" in Harmon/Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 9th ed., p. 166.

10 In "Sunday Night in Santa Rosa," the circus performer is the "Dead Man [who] loads his coffin on a truck," and the dead will dominate *The Gods of Winter*. That volume ends with "Equations of the Light" which transport us to the noon of *Interrogations at Noon*. Within that volume, the opening "Words" is matched by the concluding "Unsaid," which is picked up again in "The Present" (that is still unopened) in *Pity the Beautiful*.

### III

Given the strong emotional appeal of Gioia's work and its daring pathos, we should also recall that, according to Aristotle, pity and fear (or terror) are the two emotions which belong properly to the pleasures of drama.<sup>11</sup> These emotions are foundational to Gioia's poetry. As for fear, it appears in Gioia mostly as mock-fear. There are ghosts in every volume, and "haunting" is a word with high frequency. In his longer essay on Seneca, Gioia credits the Roman sage both with introducing the figure of the ghost which would become such a staple of Tudor revenge tragedies **and** with being the fountainhead of Italian opera, especially in Monteverdi.<sup>12</sup> Connections abound, as soon as one starts looking for them.

But it is in the realm of pity that Gioia has definitely cornered the market. I haven't made a full statistical analysis, but I'd wager that the word "pity" along with its attendant "self-pity" and other permutations shows up proportionately more often in Gioia's poetry than in the work of any other poet writing in English. Searching in the history of recent English-language literature, I discovered that "pity" has made an appearance in only a highly select circle of modern and premodern poets, among them many whom Gioia would readily name as counting among his favorites or his masters: Emily Dickinson, E. E. Cummings, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Eugenio Montale. Where Lowell speaks politics with his line "Pity the Monsters!" in his poem "Florence" from *For the Union Dead*, Gioia speaks the history of show business, drama, and human vanity in the title poem of *Pity the Beautiful*.

### IV

How does the strategy I propose to have identified work in an individual poem? Let us look at the micro-level of two quite different poems, from two phases of Gioia's poetic production, in order to see Gioia's dramatic props at work in the telling of a

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11 Aristotle, *The Rhetoric and the Poetics of Aristotle*, p. 240.

12 Lucius A. Seneca, and David R. Slavitt, *Seneca: The Tragedies*, Vol II, p. xiii.

narrative. My first example of a recognizable and emotionally effective five-part dramatic structure within a longer narrative poem is found in “The Homecoming,” a long narrative poem in eight numbered sections. “The Homecoming” composes the entirety of Part IV of Gioia’s second volume, *The Gods of Winter* (39-52). Too long to reproduce here, the poem has a speaker whom we meet in a house at night, waiting for someone whose “headlights [are] coming up the drive” (GW 39). The speaker then diverts us into a narrative of his life. He was raised by a demonstratively pious foster-mother, passed his adolescence reading adventure books and adopting a kind of Machiavellian world picture. His hiding place was an abandoned well in which a boy had drowned. Familiarizing himself with the concept of death, he killed small animals at first, stole, went to prison, and eventually escaped by killing a guard. Returning to his now-aged foster mother’s house, he sends her current foster-son away, kills his foster-mother, and then sits waiting for the police to return him to prison. Thematically, the poem negotiates the psychology of an abandoned loner who deliberately chooses violence, “adrenaline—the phoney high / that violence unleashes in your blood” (GW 52) to dominate his life. The poem turns out to be an extended confession of guilt, spoken to the police (the “you” of line 1, page 39), in beautifully crafted language and affecting similes. The killer as poet and as aesthete is celebrated in these lines.

The eight numbered sections fall readily into the five parts of a drama. Section I is a prologue providing the setting. Sections II and III, narrating the story of the biological and the foster mothers and the abandonment of childish religious practice, take us into the first act of the drama. The deliberate appellation of both biological and foster mother as merely “she” suggests that the speaker conflates the two. A sort of second abandonment happens when the boy recognizes his mother at a fair but she fails to acknowledge their relation. The second act, serving to develop the plot, is taken up by section IV and the first seven stanzas of section V, ending with the discovery of the well. Act III, in which the boy shapes his destiny and reaches an existential crisis, begins with his imaginary

conversations with the drowned boy and continues into petty killings, theft, and finally armed robbery. In classical drama, Act IV is supposed to divert and retard the main action. Section VI of the poem, along with the opening three stanzas of section VII, does this admirably: there is no better way to retard the action than to evoke the stretch of seemingly interminable time the speaker spends in prison, slowly realizing that he needs to kill his foster mother. With “I walked up to the house,” Act V begins. It takes us through the rest of section VII and section VIII, highlights moments in which the speaker reconsiders, but ends with the killing being accomplished. In the poem “Homecoming” then, the monologue is as dramatic—both in terms of emotion and in terms of dramatic form—as any in Robert Browning, though the killer in Gioia’s poem is both more directly implicated and more remorseful than the husband of the “Last Duchess.” To recognize the five-act structure means to acknowledge that narrative alone isn’t sufficient to characterize the appeal of this poem. In addition, it is the grand arc of drama that touches the reader in the unfolding of the plot.

For a second example of drama, I choose the very different, lyrical poem “The Apple Orchard” from *Pity the Beautiful*. One of Gioia’s strongest poetic emotions, regret, is found in the tug-of-the heart felt in the missed opportunity for a deeper human connection which, however, might well have led to greater disappointment if acted upon.

You won’t remember it—the apple orchard  
We wandered through one April afternoon,  
Climbing the hill behind the empty farm.

A city boy, I’d never seen a grove  
Burst in full flower or breathed the bittersweet  
Perfume of blossoms mingled with the dust.

A quarter mile of trees in fragrant rows  
Arching above us. We walked the aisle,  
Alone in spring’s ephemeral cathedral.

We had the luck, if you can call it that,  
Of having been in love but never lovers—  
The bright flame burning, fed by pure desire.

Nothing consumed, such secrets brought to light!  
There was a moment when I stood behind you,  
Reached out to spin you toward me...but I stopped.

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

The literary parentage of this poem ranges from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Marvell's "The Garden" via Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (the unconsummated kiss) to Frost's "After Apple-Picking." The first word, "you," identifies the rhetorical situation as a conversation; the last stanza asks, and answers, a rhetorical question with a wistful Frostian "perhaps," ending the poem on a lesson learned regretfully. The last word, "lost," completes the circle to the opening "you," but the last line also makes room for a "we" that exists, if not in reality, at least in the poem. The brief story told here is affecting as a narrative but derives its effectiveness from the dramatic arc of its telling. Scene one, the rising action, is an uphill climb in spring. Scene two, an expansive development of the sensations and sensory perceptions, is heightened by teenage sensibility and responsive already to the tinge of "bittersweet" and "dust," the markers of future decay. A mock wedding—walking the aisle—fills scene three of this drama, brought to fever pitch by erotic potential that remains unconsummated. The retardation of scene four is literally enacted in the poem by the speaker's refusal to make the beloved face him, expressed typographically with elision dots. And scene five is the rest of the speaker's life, the "what-if" and the "might have been" the poet evokes in so many of his texts, like "Summer Storm" (*IN* 66-67). "The Apple Orchard" is then one among many of Gioia's texts which perform this dramatic arc.

## V

As we turn from micro- to macro-level, the questions become more speculative. How far can one take the dramatic five-act structure in Gioia? Is he aiming to achieve a grand drama with the next, the fifth published volume of poems? This idea, or prophecy, presupposes that the four extant volumes can or should themselves take the place of the first four acts. Indications for this are plentiful. Most obviously, the very title of the third volume, *Interrogations at Noon*, gives it a place at the center of the five-act drama about to shape itself. Noon is the middle of the 24-hour day, the climax from which the day declines. The title poem is, expectedly, a closet drama; it is a conversation the speaker has with his “better self,” which in turn is a conscience-like instance that upbraids the speaker. The speaker has reached a crossroads at which the “better man I might have been” still looms as a possibility for the afternoon and evening. The volume is framed by two poems which interrogate the very material of poems, their words. The opening text, “Words,” accords primacy to matter, suggesting that “the world does not need words. It articulates itself...” but perhaps human beings **do** need words. The closing poem, titled “Unsaid,” meditates on what words do **not** (yet?) say.

The entire volume, *Interrogations at Noon*, is acutely aware of the passage of time. The short “Curriculum vitae” which concludes the central, third section and thus takes a position in the middle of the middle, is attentive to the root meaning of “curriculum,” running, speeding up the time that remains.

Looking back at the first two volumes from this vantage point, one may assign them the characters of first and second acts. *Daily Horoscope* lays out a life’s work with “The Burning Ladder” and takes us through the early life of a contemporary romantic who both celebrates and bemoans our practice of “getting and spending,” in Wordsworthian strains. Act II of the set would then be represented by *The Gods of Winter*, a volume focused on early sorrow, in the manner of Thomas Mann. Leaping ahead to Act IV, *Pity the Beautiful* begins to reap that harvest, especially in its fifth

section which bears the line “this luscious and impeccable fruit of life,” taken from Wallace Stevens, as its epigraph. Fruits reappear in “the Apple Orchard,” already discussed above. A long poetic autumn, this volume seeks to retard the passage to darkness.

*Pity the Beautiful* ends with a poem that gestures towards the wisdom that life seen in five acts may eventually transport. The highly personal lyric “Majority,” which thematizes the fact that the son the Gioias lost in early childhood would now be twenty-one years old, closes that particular chapter in the poet’s life: “it makes sense / that you have moved away / into your own afterlife” (PB 68). The “your own” disassociates the speaker from his son, releases the son, and refocuses the poet’s attention on further fruits of wisdom that may yet be reaped.

Will Dana Gioia publish additional volumes of poetry that will build the shape of a five-act drama? No reader knows the answer. It need not be a single volume: I can well imagine an evening volume, or even “night-thoughts,” in which the tone of regret will surely not diminish. The “what-if” remains the most pregnant term in Gioia’s poems. But with the afternoon hours wisdom increases. John Keats, one of Gioia’s models, not coincidentally associates the adjective “mellow” with autumn in his “To Autumn.” In the unfolding drama of a poet’s *curriculum vitae*, the staging of Dana Gioia’s lyrical moments remains, for now, open towards the future.

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