

THE LOCUTORIUM

THE WAY OF WORDS

An interview with Dana Gioia, by Timothy Danaher, O.P.

BIOGRAPHY

Dana Gioia is the Judge Widney Professor of Poetry and Public Culture at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles. He is the author of four books of poetry, most recently *Pity the Beautiful* (Graywolf, 2012). His *Interrogations at Noon* (Graywolf, 2001) won the American Book Award. He has also published numerous articles and essay collections, including the 1991 volume *Can Poetry Matter?* He was awarded the Laetare Medal in 2010.

A native of California, Professor Gioia earned a B.A. and an M.B.A. from Stanford University, as well as an M.A. in Comparative Literature from Harvard University. He resigned as the Vice-President of Marketing at General Foods in 1992 to write full-time, and he was appointed by George W. Bush to serve as Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts from 2003 – 2009.

INTERVIEW

I'd like to talk a little bit about poetry and prayer, but we have to admit at the outset that's somewhat of an impossible task. It would be unfair just to sketch analogies or toss a few ideas around. What do you think is the right way to begin?

Poetry and prayer are related, but we have to make distinctions. When I pray, I mostly do formal prayer. In fact, I often pray in Latin. When I recite the prayers, they have the effect—anyone who has been raised in a ritual religion will understand this—of bringing me into a zone of consciousness that is different from normal experience. My consciousness is narrowly focused but intensely heightened. It is also oddly passive. That part is not unlike a moment of poetic inspiration. But the next part is very different. Now the poet needs to craft the actual poem. That activity is not like prayer—at least to my experience. Getting the poem into words is an aggressive, domineering, and egotistic undertaking. The poet presumes to be a little god creating a small verbal universe.

What matters in writing a poem is perfect verbal articulation of the inner impulse. What matters in prayer is the quality of the internal impulse. Who would fault a devout supplicant for being unable fully to articulate a silent prayer? And who would excuse a poet for being unable to express that inspiration in words?

There's a parallel, I think, that you begin with an impulse, but you're trying to get at understanding it, to know more of what it is.

When I was young, I knew everything. (Just as both of my sons now think they know everything.) As I get older, I wonder just what I really know. I've come to a position that I can't think my way to God. I can only respond to Him—mostly by doing my best to live in the right way. I'm humbler now before myself, before creation, before other people. Writing lets me try to delve into the heart of things, into areas that I frankly don't understand when I begin. And the endpoint almost always surprises me. In fact, if it doesn't surprise me, I consider the poem unremarkable. Poetry is the most difficult thing I do. I often wonder why I do it. The only reason is that I have no choice. It's what I've been called to do.

I've heard talk that poetry begins as a sort of seeing, a moment of surprise or insight, before writing anything down. The psalms certainly seem to begin in an experience, which only then leads to poetry, then to prayer. It's interesting that for the last 2000 years Christian monks and nuns have spent a good part of their daily life with this old Jewish poetry! But how does poetry begin for you?

The way a poem begins for me is as an impulse. Sometimes the impulse comes as a line or two, but it is usually largely intuitive and inchoate. I can actually feel a poem physically. I feel it in my neck, my chest, and my temples. It's a kind of suddenly heightened consciousness. Then the work is bringing it into words. When I was twenty, I didn't understand that truth and beauty are really two sides of the same thing. While it is a fundamental Thomistic point, it didn't sink in until I worked through it all myself. In creating a poem I'm trying to get at some truth, that is slightly outside of my reach, and to express it in a way that is beautiful.

And whom is it expressed for? Whom do you write for?

Poetry tries to recreate that truth for someone else—the imaginary reader. Not a non-existent reader, but a possible reader or readers the poet imagines. Elizabeth Bishop once said a poem is “lots of things coming together at the same time.” I think that's actually a pretty good explanation. There will be something I've noticed about the world, and suddenly I see some new connection with something else. That juxtaposition begins the poem, but how does one take these largely subjective, intuitive experiences and make it so a stranger could understand it? That is the challenge.

You have a calling to poetry proper, but would you call any act of taking something unspeakable and trying to say it “poetic,” in a

broader sense? For instance, there are Church fathers—Augustine, Gregory of Nazianzus, Origen—whose style is, I would say, “poetic.” Even when it comes to theology, they’re using language beautifully, pushing it to keep up with their thoughts and insights, to describe it more. I’m thinking also of poetry’s role in renewing and developing language. Eliot says in the Four Quartets, “Last year’s words belong to last year’s language / Next year’s words await another voice . . . to purify the dialect of the tribe.”

What a modern philosopher tries to do is strip away language of all the associations that can’t be controlled, so that language becomes as neutral a medium as mathematics. What a poet does is just the opposite. A poet instinctively employs the associations and the indirections of language as fundamental to what he’s doing. Poetic language and philosophic language are quite opposite. I’ve occasionally noticed something in thinkers as diverse as Augustine, Aquinas, Schopenhauer, Hegel, or Maritain: these philosophers sometimes get frustrated by the neutrality of the medium in which they’re working. And they just let go. They understand that they can communicate the things they want more efficiently, more truthfully, by modulating briefly into poetic language. There are different ways that we understand things, because essentially, we are complicated beings; with emotions, memory, reason, intuition, imagination, as well as the physical senses. We respond to embodied language more strongly than abstractions.

For a Christian, it has to be remarked that Jesus, insofar as I can tell, never really discussed theology. He told stories. What that suggests is that God speaks to us in the fullness of our being in a kind of incarnate language. You should literally be able to feel real poetry in your lungs, in your pulse, as well as in your mind, your eyes, and your heart. A poem uses language in the fullness of its capacity, to express the fullness of our experience. For me the act of writing a poem is like circling around something, trying to get at the truth and the beauty of it.

And we're trying to achieve understanding: Plato's highest aim is finally getting even a glimpse of understanding . . .

That's why Plato, although he wants to ban poets from his ideal republic, can't resist indulging in poetic passages himself. It allows the philosopher to get at certain things so effectively. My poem "Words" deals with this paradox: the world exists outside of words, but how do you reconcile it with words? Words can't do everything, nonetheless they're the best things we have. One way to describe existence with words is philosophy, another way is *poesis*—song and storytelling. It is a wonderful irony that Plato's central contribution to Western thought was expressed in the form of an image and a story—the myth of a cave.

There's always talk of the Muse. I suppose the parallel in prayer might be the Holy Spirit. What do you make of that?

I absolutely believe in the Muse. In the classical world most poets were men. It's interesting that they claimed a female goddess inspired their poems. It was their way of saying that inspiration arrived as something alien and external to themselves, outside of their normal consciousness. Poetic inspiration is involuntary. There are shabby poets who can sit down and write poems by the yard, but I have a sense that a real poem is given to you. A moment of deep insight comes into your consciousness—inspiration—which is an invitation to explore and penetrate further.

I feel that a poem is given to me. I would not dare claim that the Holy Spirit gives me a poem. That seems presumptuous, even spiritually dangerous. But I can make a logical case that there's some aspect of our own psyche that we don't normally have access to, and somehow poetic inspiration reflects its sudden unleashing. Thomas Merton once remarked that after a monk has been silent for a couple of months, he starts to hear voices. He has finally cleared all the noise in his life away, and for the first time he hears



MARC CHAGALL - SELF-PORTRAIT WITH MUSE (DREAM)

his own soul converse with itself. That's what a poet feels when inspiration comes—that it breaks forth. The trick is to know how to listen.

Even in the case of pre-Christian poets, couldn't you say that given our complexities, something like inspiration is just bound to happen

here and there? Look at the human creature, our complexities, how we process, how we're filtering, how our senses are constantly providing data: within all of our sorting, sometimes things are just offered back to us, gratuitously.

The origin of the Muse in Western culture occurs in the *Theogony* by Hesiod. The author is a shepherd on Mount Helicon, and nine scary women suddenly appear to him, the Muses. They tell him, "We're going to tell you about how the gods were born, and you're going to learn things from us no one knows. We want you to tell people these mysteries, but you must remember that you didn't invent these stories. Whenever you tell them, you've got to say that they come from the Muses." And Hesiod does just that, and so do later poets. Eventually you get Milton's "Heav'nly Muse." He creates a Christian version of this source of inspiration. If you go back to the origin, the Muses disclose supernatural knowledge to the poet, the knowledge of either forbidden things or hidden things, and the teller needs to get the story right. That's what I'm trying to do when I write—get it right. W. H. Auden, who was probably the most intelligent poet of the last century, warns about the danger of some poets who in order "to wow an audience, utter some resonant lie." What I'm trying to do is to find the music, but to avoid the "resonant lie." What I admire most in poetry is memorable music that unfolds mysteries. That's what Hopkins and Eliot do. The Catholic sense of a mystery is central to my sense of poetry.

This issue of Dominicana takes up the topic of ressourcement, of returning to the sources. Besides getting it "right" for your contemporary audience, how much do you rely on poets of the past? As the Church relies on the communion of saints, do poets in some way rely on the Western canon?

The communion of saints is central to my vision of literary life—I mean this quite literally. Forty years ago I put that concept into the center of my writing life, and it helped me to survive spiritually. Literature is basically a conversation. Poetry is a conversation between the writer and the reader, between the past and the present, between the living and the dead, and eventually with readers not yet born—a great cloud of witnesses, as it were. You come into this conversation gradually. You don't just butt in and start talking. You respect the astonishing continuity of spirit that literature represents. You listen. You learn. You slowly start to participate in a conversation that has existed as long as humanity. Any word you use in a poem, or almost any word, has been used before. So what you're really doing is becoming part of an existing conversation, and by becoming part of it, you make it your own. If you lose the continuity, you lose much of your power as a poet.

To play devil's advocate, there's a line from Good Will Hunting where Robin Williams asks Matt Damon if he has a soul-mate. He says, "Shakespeare, Nietzsche, Frost, O'Connor, Chaucer, Pope, Kant—" but Williams cuts him off: "They're all dead . . . you can't give back to them." As much as you continue in the conversation with the poets of the past, does poetry disconnect you from common life?

Engagement is a matter of individual character. Poetry comes out of the life you actually lead. Some of that life is internal, some external. Some of it is private, some of it is social. Some of it is sacred, and some of it is secular. The ratio between those things will differ by the poet. When I talk about my conversations with the dead (which I take very seriously), I don't mean that those are the only people I talk to. A poet always writes for the living—whether or not they notice. I believe in the continuity of the living and the dead. That's something else which poetry has in common with prayer.

It seems that the poet has the unique challenge of bringing the interior world outside. It's his task to be removed from things in order to see them, but also to be more in touch with them as well.

I just published a tiny book of translations of Mario Luzi. I consider him the great Catholic poet of the twentieth century. In one poem Luzi claimed that the purpose of his work was to penetrate the impenetrable world. That's what a poet tries to do. But there are so many things happening on the surface of a poem that I don't always understand the larger patterns immediately. I only began to comprehend the real course of my own work once I had some distance from it. It wasn't, for example, until after my first book had been published that I saw its real theme was the hidden relationships between the visible and the invisible, the past and the present, the temporal and the eternal. Until then I was too close to the poems to discern their larger shape.

Poetry necessarily begins in the temporal, the mundane, the immediate. That's the only place you can stand with any authority. Then you try to get the glimpses and the resonances of what lies beyond. You write out of your own life; you have no other choice. But a lot of life happens in imagination—your dreams, the books you've read—not simply your external daily routine. Focusing solely on external life is an impoverished vision of what a life is. The greater the poet, the more of his or her life is brought into the poems. And your interior life is always touched by your exterior life. When I pray, I never pray for myself (which is probably a mistake). I'm always praying for other people, so even my interior spiritual life reflects the outer world. That fact doesn't make it any less part of my interior life. Poetry and prayer both connect our inner lives to the outer reality.

Professor Gioia has generously offered the following poem as a complement to the interview. It can also be found in his collection Interrogations at Noon.

UNSAID

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.

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Timothy Danaher entered the Order of Preachers in 2011.