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“Tradition Is a Romance”: An Interview with Dana Gioia

Cassandra Atherton

Chairman Dana Gioia is charismatic. Boyishly handsome, exceedingly intelligent, powerful, and yet somehow humble. I read his groundbreaking article, “Can Poetry Matter?” before I read any of his poetry and I found myself nodding at the end of every line. He is honest. Refreshingly honest. And instead of just mourning the state of poetry, he has ideas for a better future. Chairman Gioia looks for a way forward. But most importantly he makes things happen. I am still fascinated by the Big Read Project (details below) and the way he manages not only to be Chairman for the National Endowment of the Arts, but poet, critic, librettist, anthologist, translator, man of letters and, of course, family man.

When I found Gioia’s impressive website (www.danagioia.net), I spent all afternoon entranced, reading his biography, his poetry and criticism. At that time I had no idea he was the Chairman. Gioia’s credentials are impressive. He is winner of the American Book Award and his poems, translations, essays and reviews have appeared in magazines such as The New Yorker, The Atlantic, The Washington Post Book World, The New York Times Book Review, Slate and The Hudson Review. He has published three books of poetry: Daily Horoscope (1986), The Gods of Winter (1991), and Interrogations at Noon (2001). He has translated poetry from Latin, Italian, German, and Romanian. His critical works include Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture (1992), and Barrier of a Common Language: An American Looks at Contemporary British Poetry (2003). He has written the libretto for Nosferatu, an opera.

There is a lot of security, and once you get by security there are personal assistants to meet before you get into Gioia’s office. One of his personal assistants remained for the duration of the interview. But when he walked up to me, shook my hand, looked me right in the eye, and said, “Hello I’m Dana, pleased to meet you,” my concerns melted away at the sound of his mellifluous voice. The Chairman made me feel right at home. We sat at the table in his huge office. But it was more like a room or a study in someone’s house than somewhere corporate. I started my tape recorder and initially it wouldn’t work. But even then the Chairman was charming and told me that ‘Gioia’ means ‘joy’ in Italian. And then the little wheels of the recorder started turning again.

WOE: Your life has been summed up as the working-class kid who carved a career in the arts. Would you say that you are living proof the American Dream is still alive and well?

GIOIA: Perhaps, but if so, I am only one of millions of Americans who have created their own lives. One of the advantages of living in the United States is a considerable freedom to shape your own future. My own bizarre life has been fashioned and re-fashioned several times across the years.

WOE: You give so much of yourself and your personal life in your work. Why do you feel it is important to share these experiences with your audience?

GIOIA: I find most public speeches boring. When I talk to an audience, I try above all else not to be dull and dopey. I've learned that sometimes the best way to communicate with an audience is to tell stories from your own life. If you are a public figure, you also have a certain obligation to introduce yourself to the public. I am by nature a very intellectual person. When I was younger, I spoke mostly in ideas. Now I try to start from my own experience and only gradually introduce some general ideas. The personal becomes the foundation for the intellectual.

WOE: Is it hard, though, when you have to talk about something intensely personal, especially something that might have been difficult for you to overcome?

GIOIA: Yes, it was hard at first. If you talk about your life, you have to include the blunders, defeats, and sorrows. When I first tried this approach, I was awkward because I didn't want to seem self-indulgent or self-promoting. I am a reserved person. I don't usually blurt out intimate details of my life. But a friend of mine recommended that I take a more personal approach. She was right. I was able to reach the audience more effectively. Maybe it's something women know better than men—that you communicate best by creating an emotional link with the listener.

WOE: In 2001 you founded Teaching Poetry. How do you improve high school teaching of poetry?

GIOIA: I was asked by some people in California to create a new writers' conference. They said I could focus on any topic that interested me. I was actually rather bewildered by this freedom. I thought about it for months. Then it occurred to me that the most underserved group in literary culture were high school teachers. These people taught kids at a pivotal moment in their lives—adolescence—when teenagers create their adult identities. These teachers helped determine whether the new

generation would be readers or not. They were especially important to creating a future generation of poetry readers.

WOE: Why was there not such a conference already in existence?

GIOIA: It offered no professional advantages to the power-brokers of literary culture. If you're a professor at a research university, you don't get promoted by helping high school teachers. The most influential people in literary America pretty much ignored the high school experience because there is no prestige in serving it. It struck me that if I wanted to improve American literary culture, high school was the place where there was both the greatest need and the greatest opportunity. If you can encourage and sustain readers at fifteen or sixteen, they may read for the rest of their lives.

WOE: You support the canonical literary tradition. Had your support had a widespread effect?

GIOIA: I'm not sure what it means to support the canonical literary tradition because the canon changes every year. There are books that now seem absolutely central to the literary canon that nobody read fifty years ago. When T. S. Eliot wrote "Tradition and the Individual Talent" ninety years ago, he was the first to notice that every time a major new work of art comes along, it changes our whole conception of the past.

WOE: What do you believe in then?

GIOIA: I believe in something different from a fixed canonical past. I believe that for the present to understand itself, it has to refer to the past. The present looks at the past to see how it can create a better future. I don't know any way of creating new art without considering what art has or hasn't done in the past. There are dozens of traditions. The canon is vast and fluid. If you are only reading books written in the last ten years, then you have a certain myopia about art.

American culture is obsessed with novelty. You see this nowhere more obviously than in television, which is always trying to sell you something new. Serious art differs from consumer entertainment because it has broader affinities that go all the way back to the past and bring more of the world into each work. In that sense, I am a traditionalist. I don't see any way of being a real artist without loving tradition. Tradition isn't an intimidating marble temple. It is a romance that enlivens and enlarges your life.

WOE: You have said that when you were at university, "I wasn't being trained to be a writer. I was being trained to be a professor." Do you think that a university education is sometimes inimical to writing? So should, or can, universities teach writing, especially creative writing?

GIOIA: I am not anti-academic. The university remains the scholarly center of culture. The problem is that today the university often assumes it possesses a monopoly on literary culture. That seems ridiculously parochial. Literary culture is broad and diverse. It includes publishing, journalism, broadcasting, and bohemia as well as academia. If you want to learn to write well, you may be better off nowadays working in journalism than getting an academic degree. At least journalists have remained professional communicators in a way that academics have not. But, of course, journalism has its own dangers for a young writer. The best possible background for a writer is probably a diverse one that combines serious academic study with the daily engagement and public responsibility of journalism. Anyone who wants to be a writer nowadays should go to the university but then get out of it.

WOE: I read in an interview posted on your website how you came to write the libretto for *Nosferatu*. You also describe how the film brings back memories of your childhood. I wanted to ask you about your ability to capture the sensuality of the Dracula myth and our fear of mortality, which you have described as being the basic existential dilemma from which genuine poetry grows. What was it like working with these themes? Was it difficult to write something that would be equally interesting on the page as on the stage?

GIOIA: Writing an opera libretto is a curious challenge for a poet. Poets are used to composing small works for the page, but drama opens up a certain power and resonance that is unique to the stage. You not only tell stories, you embody them in dramatic action. Working with a composer, you can also wrap all the power of music and song around those actions. I found writing a libretto a difficult but intoxicating undertaking. There are certain truths that you can only communicate as stories. There are certain mental and emotional states that you can communicate most clearly in performance. You feel the particular power of the operatic form when you see the work performed on stage.

One of the advantages the librettist has today is the technology of supertitles. The audience can see every line of the text. Both times that *Nosferatu* was produced, the company used supertitles. I could tell how effective that was. Afterwards an instructively large number of people told me they had had an unexpected literary experience while watching the opera. To their surprise, they experienced the opera as poetic drama. The operatic stage is the last portion of the theatre world in which the poet is a necessary collaborator.

WOE: Did anything surprise you in writing your libretto?

GIOIA: The final libretto in *Nosferatu* contained many themes that I had never dealt with before in my poetry or I had only dealt with tangentially. This was especially true of the very dark material—especially the dangerous side of sexuality and the death wish. Over the years I have noticed the power of the death wish—the longing for the peace of oblivion. People do things that they know are destructive, but they become intoxicated by the thrill of danger—drugs, drinking, violence, sex. It's a powerful subject matter that I had never really gotten into apart from a few poems. Using the vampire myth in *Nosferatu* allowed me to explore these themes in a way that surprised me once I was finished.

WOE: Do readers become writers? How important is an early reading role model or mentor?

GIOIA: It is impossible to become a writer without first being a reader. Passionate reading is the precondition to literary creation. You fall in love with the medium. You drink it. You breathe it. You dream it. And eventually, you become it. Reading awakens our imagination. It develops our inner life. It refines our powers of articulation. I can tell right away when a young writer hasn't read enough: the language is stale, the ideas are clichéd, the standards are low.

WOE: Why did you begin your national campaign in 2005 to promote reading with the Big Read program? How successful has it been? Why is it important for people to read good literature?

GIOIA: The Big Read emerged out of a study the National Endowment for the Arts had done on American arts participation. We conducted what is probably the largest study of its kind in the world—which measured Americans' participation in all of the arts, including theatre, dance, music, museum-going, and reading. The study showed us a dramatic and universal decline in literary reading in the United States. Every group of Americans was reading less than they had read ten years ago (and dramatically less than they did twenty years ago). There were declines in every group, regardless of age, gender, income, education, ethnicity, or region. The biggest decline was among younger adults who, in twenty years, had gone from the people who read the most in America to the ones who read the least.

WOE: Why was this decline important for anyone who wasn't a teacher or writer?

GIOIA: I felt that there was a crisis, not simply in reading, but in American culture. Our data enabled us to correlate reading behavior with involvement in other arts and with civic involvement. We saw that people who read were two to three times more likely to do volunteer or

charity work, to go to the theatre, to attend concerts, to visit museums. Readers were even twice as likely to go to sporting events. We observed that people who read were more involved in their communities and more involved in the arts. There is a phenomenon in ecological studies where a particular group, such as amphibians, can be used to indicate the overall health of the ecosystem. I think the key indicator for a democracy is reading. If you have universal literacy and active adult reading, then most other things in a democracy will be healthy. When you don't, you tend to develop a passive, alienated population.

WOE: But how did this cultural diagnosis result in the Big Read?

GIOIA: Because of this study the NEA decided to create one national program of ambition and effectiveness. We did not invent the basic idea of the Big Read. We only improved on a grassroots concept that had been tried in a number of American communities to get people reading together. Most communities who had tried the idea liked it, but they didn't have the resources or skills to be able to repeat it or do it broadly. The Big Read is not about kids reading, it's about everybody reading. A community chooses a book, and the NEA develops television programming, radio programming, print programming, and educational materials to support that book, in addition to providing a grant that allows communities to galvanize themselves.

WOE: How broadly have you tried the Big Read?

GIOIA: We piloted it in ten American cities, ranging from a town of eleven hundred people to a metropolis of four million. Now we are expanding it into 200 cities across all 50 states. We've seen that you can get hundreds of organizations and institutions within a single community to partner up and reach every corner of the community. Ideally, we have every high school, every library branch, all the major cultural institutions, the newspaper, the leading radio station, television station, the chamber of commerce, and even retirement homes partnering with us to provide perhaps one hundred different events around the book. Fundamentally, serious literature becomes an on-going discussion in a community. A town can define its own character through reading. I think that's a very powerful civic notion.

WOE: You said once, "I write more for my old fellow workers, who would never read my poems, than for the literati." Is this still true? If so, does it encapsulate a lifelong tension for you between your background in working-class Los Angeles and your role today with the NEA?

GIOIA: Absolutely. The dilemma of the modern poet is that you need to write for a general reader, but your gatekeepers are hyper-intellectual

literati who are often out of touch with what a general reader wants. I write for an alert and intelligent non-specialist audience. I write for the common reader. Some people, especially academics, misunderstand that ambition. When I say "common reader," I don't mean the common non-reader. I don't mean someone completely oblivious of art and ideas. I'm talking about probably half the population—intelligent, alert, curious people who probably have been so traumatized or so bored by studying poetry in school that they never want to read another poem.

WOE: But will these people listen to a poet?

GIOIA: It has been my experience that if you can bring these people into touch with genuine poetry, they are the best audiences imaginable. If art is an enterprise that is only about artists talking to one another, then it is a very small thing. Literature is one of the great human expressions. It has the potential of reaching broad and mixed audiences. Literature is one of the ways that people stay in touch with their own humanity. So that is the paradoxical situation of the modern poet: You write for the reader who is convinced that he or she won't like your work.

WOE: What do you think is the future of poetry?

GIOIA: The future of poetry is very bright, but it will probably be very different from the future that poetry professionals imagine. Let me give you one tiny instance. Poetry professionals tend to measure the success of poetry by the sales of books. A book of poems is not the best measure of poetry. The unit of cultural currency for poetry is the individual poem. Not only is the individual poem what people remember, but it is also a complete and freestanding work of art—like a painting or song. One nice thing about the individual poem is that it can be read on the radio or television. It can be recited in public. It can be downloaded off the internet as text or audio. It can reach millions who don't encounter it in a printed book.

The future of poetry, like most of the past of poetry, is going to be increasingly oral and performative. The electronic media has the power to reach more people than could easily have been done through print. That means poets will probably write a little differently. In America we have seen poetry regain a popular audience—largely because it's gone back to being off the page, which is where poetry began. Poetry is human speech raised to its highest levels of expressivity, concision, and memorability. That was the past of poetry, and I think it will also be the future of the art.



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Official site for poet and critic Dana Gioia. Bio. Poems. Books. Poetry. Criticism. Anthologies. Video: On the Importance of Reading and Literacy. Paradigms Lost. Interview with Gloria Brame. On Writing Nosferatu and the Role of Poet as Librettist. Interview with Lequita Vance-Watkins. World Literature Today. Interview with Michelle Johnson. Tethered by Letters. Copyright © 2019 Dana Gioia. Interview. A Conversation with Dana Gioia. Erika Koss | Issue 73. Erika Koss. Dana Gioia "poet, critic, and arts leader" has sometimes said, "I'm the only person who ever went to Stanford Business School to become a poet." For many years, Gioia served on Image's editorial advisory board, and he has been a guest lecturer for the Seattle Pacific University MFA program in creative writing. In 2010 he won the prestigious Laetare Medal from Notre Dame. Did you and your brother really plant a redwood in memory of your first son with a lock of his hair and a piece of his umbilical cord wrapped in its roots according to an old Sicilian tradition? DG: Yes, everything in the poem is true. Hear Dana Gioia read his poem, "Unsaid". Only Available in Archive Formats. Real Media. Windows. National Endowment for the Arts Chairman Dana Gioia Jocelyn Augustino hide caption. toggle caption. Jocelyn Augustino. As the nation celebrates National Poetry Month, NPR's Susan Stamberg interviews poet Dana Gioia, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. They discuss the NEA's comeback from controversies and the outlook for arts funding. Related NPR Stories. A Weekend Edition Saturday report on Dana Gioia.