REVIEW-ESSAY

THE PLACE OF POETRY IN TWITTERLAND

Pity the Beautiful by Dana Gioia (Minneapolis: Gray Wolfe Press, 2012)
Blue Norther and Other Poems by William Bedford Clark
(Huntsville, TX: Texas Review Press, 2010)

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In the title essay of his 1992 collection of essays, *Can Poetry Matter?*, Dana Gioia observes, "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." The cultural irrelevance of poetry coincides with what appears to be a flourishing of all things poetical such as the world has never seen—at least in statistical terms. Nearly a thousand new volumes of poetry are published annually, in addition to the hundreds of poems appearing in various poetry journals. There are two-hundred-odd graduate creative-writing programs in the United States, and—my favorite number—they can be expected "to produce about 20,000 accredited professional poets over the next decade."

That was in 1992. The term nowadays would probably be *credentialed*, and there are, doubtless, even more such "professional poets." All this frenetic activity among the muses, however, is noticed almost exclusively by creative writing teachers and their students. Gioia, who once worked in the food industry, sums it up in a sly economic analogy: "Like subsidized farming that grows food no one wants, a poetry industry has been created to serve the interests of the producers and not the consumers." Things have hardly changed—they have certainly not improved—in the past twenty years.

This state of affairs ought to be a source of alarm to anyone concerned about the intellectual health of our society. That almost none of the rapidly diminishing number of American readers—men and women who read serious works of fiction and nonfiction—also read verse is a symptom of cultural pathology. Skilled readers of verse are better readers of prose; better readers are better writers and better thinkers. They have a grasp of language that is both richer and more refined; their extended vocabulary, when it is derived from words in context,

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embedded in vibrant, imaginative poetry, opens up a more enlightened and concrete vision of reality. This amounts to knowledge of the world that enhances intelligence as well as moral and spiritual insight. It became clear to me how valuable reading and writing about poetry were to teaching composition only when universities stopped doing it in freshman English during the 1980s.

In view of the persisting state of affairs adumbrated by Dana Gioia twenty years ago, a review of two new books of verse, one by Gioia himself, may seem problematic. The thesis urged herein proposes a dilemma: the general neglect of these volumes and others like them is a sign of serious educational decline and cultural malaise; the appropriate answer to this deterioration in the intellectual and aesthetic tone of our society is, however, to read these books.

Put in these terms, reading poetry sounds like a duty or a chore. It might more profitably be compared to dancing: the waltz and the fox trot are far more delightful ways of keeping fit than exercise machines, but dancing must be learned, indeed, mastered. This is hardly a novel idea: "True ease in writing comes from art, not chance, / As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance." Pope may as well have said "reading" as "writing," since the quoted work is *An Essay in Criticism* rather than an *Ars Poetica*. Poetry keeps the mind agile precisely because it requires the reader to *do something*, to engage the text attentively—*critically* in the sense of exercising judgment—by attending scrupulously to every nuance of meaning in each word.

Consider, as an example, "The Seven Deadly Sins," from Dana Gioia's *Pity the Beautiful*:

> Forget about the other six, says Pride.
> They're only using you.
>
> Admittedly, Lust is a looker,
> but you can do better.

It may be helpful first to notice what this poem is *not*: there is no "confessional" revelation of the poet's long antagonism toward "Daddy" in the manner of Sylvia Plath, no brooding over his addictions as Robert Lowell so often does. The speaker is Pride, an allegorical personification from a medieval morality play like *The Castle of Perseverance*.

But of course no one would confuse the utterance of Gioia's Pride with a medieval morality character: this is a contemporary—a *realistic* voice—knowing, familiar, insinuating. It is a smart, smug, beguiling voice to which not only Dana Gioia but you and I also, dear reader, have listened all too often—indeed, have aspired to emulate. Pride proves his pedigree and preeminence by sardonically dismissing all the other sins: even Gluttony cannot finish his meal at the "cheesy dive" chosen by the other sins; Anger, before the meal is finished, "is already arguing about the bill," and so on. As all the other sins leave, Pride twitches our sleeve:

> But stick around. I have a story
>
> that not everyone appreciates—
> about the special satisfaction
> of staying on board as the last
> grubby lifeboat pushes away.

A moral interpretation of the poem is easy enough: when the other temptations have begun to fade—when the sensual delectation of lust and gluttony begin to pall; when the lure of anger, avarice, and envy sink in weariness; when even sloth gives way to worry about eternity—still the hard knot of ego, which is the essence of pride, refuses to relent. But this hardly does justice to the

brilliance of the conceit: the contrary of Noah's saving Ark is a spiritual *Titanic*, and anyone who fails to grasp the brilliance of the "grubby lifeboats" need only recall the last time he sighed impatiently and rolled his eyes in disdain at the woman in the next pew, garbed in overly snug polyester, who sings each dreadful hymn loudly and off-key. Still more powerful is the blistering irony of the language: simple, spare, intimate, and altogether seductive. Sophisticated sinners are too refined for ordinary gluttony or lust or anger: we're *different*.

I have been telling you about the poem, but the poem does not tell you about pride: it allows you to experience with a shudder the allure of scorning the "grubby lifeboats" and hence to acknowledge the humility requisite for being rescued from the abyss of sin. As Gioia explains in another of his essays, "The Poet in an Age of Prose," a particular poem attains its specific end by engaging and enhancing the reader's cultural and linguistic resources:

> Poems do not exist in isolation but share and exploit the history and literature of the language in which they are written. Although each new poem seeks to create a kind of temporary perfection in and of itself, it accomplishes this goal by recognizing the reader's lifelong experience with words, images symbols, stories, sounds and ideas outside of its own text. By successfully employing the word or image that triggers a particular set of associations, a poem can condense immense amounts of intellectual, sensual, and emotional meaning into a single line or phrase.

Liberal education is thus a cumulative process with no clear beginning or end; it is not like learning to change a tire or bake a pie. Liberal education is rather like learning to read—a task that is never completed as one's awareness of language, history, culture, the realities of human nature and the human condition, deepen and mature. "The Seven Deadly Sins" exemplifies the value of poetry to education by proffering a beautifully formed and profound imaginative vision that invites us to achieve a more perspicacious realization with each reading.

Capturing the full meaning of a poem—or something close to it—thus depends upon the reader's recognition not only of cultural allusions but also of the import of formal aspects of the poem itself. Consider, for example, William Bedford Clark's "Abortions" (which first appeared in *Modern Age*):

> After the first, Kate dreamed quite frequently
> That a gutted kitten, eyeless and gray,
> Revolved on a cracked lazy-susan's tray
> And mewed from hunger. It had no belly.
>
> The dream dispersed with the shifting weather.
> She met Mark at a Green Party rally.
> On her laptop, she'd playfully tally
> Their double comings. He favored leather.
>
> She missed one period, then two. Then Mark
> Missed Pam and his boys. Kate had another
> (At his expense), moved back with her mother
> In Lowell, and took to jogging after dark.

Every now and then, in the office,
gym, or mall,
She strains to hear a blinded kitten's
empty call.

At first glance, this may appear to be a fairly straightforward, topical poem in which the author's aversion to abortion is proclaimed.

In fact, nothing is proclaimed at all. Rather, the lives of those no-longer-quite-so-young women one sees pounding the asphalt before dawn on Sunday morning, accoutred in spandex and headphones, are dramatically imagined. Further, much of the poem's significance is unappreciated until the reader notices that it is a sonnet—a form by long tradition associated with ardent, idealistic love. A poet can redeploy a genre—this is what original poets do—but he cannot eradicate its history. A shrewd writer will do as Clark does here, invoking the sonnet tradition for the irony it generates in the new context. The effect is to highlight local ironies in the text, such as the alliterative link between "laptop"—epitome of our shiny technical sophistication—and "leather," with its intimations of the primitive and brutal.

The sonnet does not tell us *that* abortion is wrong, much less *why*, any more than Gioia's poem tells us that sin is wicked. We do not go to poetry for argument or explanation. Like drama and prose fiction, poetry is a representation of human experience. The short *lyrical* poem with which we are most familiar today (originally a poem to be sung to the accompaniment of a *lyre*—the guitar of the ancient world) is most often a representation of ideas, attitudes, and, above all, feelings; that is, of the inner experiences we all have. Dana Gioia forces us inside the smug willfulness of sin in a manner that is simultaneously subjective (we can feel it) and objective (Oh no, this is how *I* was acting!); William Bedford Clark offers us in fourteen lines a tightly compressed, implied narrative of a life wasted in romantic self-delusion. The incidents, barely hinted at, are synecdoches for a typical contemporary "lifestyle," in which accruing guilt over an unspeakable deed that cannot be faced is displaced into the image of a mutilated kitten. Clark need not explain why a woman would wish to avoid such a nightmare; no more does Gioia need to tell us why we ought to decline pride's invitation that sends a chill through our souls.

Poetry is, therefore, the antithesis of "social media." Having never "posted" on Facebook or "tweeted," I am bound to confess that I speak at secondhand, but my conviction is not thereby diminished. It may be possible to fit a haiku into the 140 characters allowable in a "tweet," but certainly not a sonnet. In any case, the style prevailing among the "postings" in both these media seems to favor cliché, abbreviation, and acronym, which are hardly conducive to the subtlety, depth, and richness of verbal texture offered by poetry. The advantage of social media would seem to be speed and convenience.

The virtue of poetry is precisely the expenditure of time, concentration, and commitment required both for writing and reading it—I am tempted to say that *inconvenience* is its principal virtue. The reader of poetry is compelled to stop and take stock, to be reflective, even contemplative. Doubtless, this will be a difficult case to make at a time when the even the First Lady and the mayor of New York have found little success convincing the populace that a steady diet of fast food fails to nourish and fills the body with dubious substances. And this at a time when Americans are far more obsessed with physical than with spiritual health.

Nevertheless, I persist: while it is not my intention to mount a campaign against

Twitter or restrict the sales of John Grisham novels (or of sugary drinks), I do recommend that, after sitting down from time to time for a leisurely dinner with real food (candles are optional), you read a novel by Faulkner or Jane Austen or attend a live performance of a play. Above all, read some poetry and discuss it with your friends and children; make it a part of your mental world. Get everyone out of the cavern, where the flutter of shadows confuses the eye and the twittering is like tinnitus in the ear, and enter the luminescent world of literature.

The two volumes of verse under consideration here will make a good place to start, because both offer work that is formally recognizable as poetry in the traditional sense and deals with perennial themes having significance for most readers. Nevertheless, their idiom and perspective are thoroughly contemporary: these poets do not try to sound like Longfellow in order to prove that they are not John Ashbery. To borrow an analogy from music, their poetry is "accessible," like the music of Arvo Pärt or Alan Hovhaness as opposed to that of John Cage or Karlheinz Stockhausen. Gioia and Clark thus write some poems in a patterned free verse, often implying the ghost of iambic pentameter, others in strict conventional forms like the sonnet or lyric in rhyming quatrains. Both occasionally use blank verse for narration or reflection. The style is, however, "a selection of language really used by men," in the sense that Wordsworth meant this phrase.

The range of interests that emerges in so slender a volume as *Pity the Beautiful* is quite remarkable. The poem that provides the title is, like "The Seven Deadly Sins," a sharp epigrammatic satire with irony modulated by an undertone of ruth. It begins with a tone of sardonic contempt:

> Pity the beautiful,
> the dolls, and the dishes,
> the babes with big daddies
> granting their wishes.

As the poem proceeds, the *pity* of the title becomes more genuine:

> Pity the faded,
> the bloated, the blowsy,
> the paunchy Adonis
> whose luck's gone lousy.

Finally, it resolves in a reflection upon the idolatry implicit in our celebrity culture:

> Pity the gods,
> no longer divine.
> Pity the night
> the stars lose their shine.

Dana Gioia is Catholic, but his poems rarely handle religion overtly. Instead, Christian faith is the implied standard against which shallow materialism of modern culture is judged.

This technique can also be seen at work in poems like "The Freeways Considered as Earth Gods" and "Shopping." In the former, the poet expatiates with mock-solemn irony on the paradoxical result of a massive highway system built to provide us with freedom to travel swiftly and safely on our own schedule: "We do not fail to worship them. Each morning / Millions creep in slow procession on our pilgrimages." And these are cruel deities: "And they demand blood sacrifice, so we mount / Our daily holocaust on the blackened ground."

"Shopping" likewise plays upon the idolatry of a consumer culture: "Sing me the hymns of no cash down and the installment plan, / Of custom fit, remote control, and priced to move." The speaking persona of

the poem cannot determine "in what department my desire shall be found," because he cannot find "in this splendid clutter . . . the one true thing." Among the "eager cashiers" and "footsore customers" he has lost his "errant soul." "Without you," he realizes in an arresting mixture of Wordsworth and the Gospel, "There is nothing but the getting and the spending / Of things that have a price."

In "The Angel with the Broken Wing," the poem that evidently supplies the inspiration for the cover illustration of the book, religious faith is approached obliquely by way of a soliloquy by "a *santo*, a devotional wooden statue carved by a Mexican folk artist" (Gioia's note). The statue has been taken from a parish church, where its left wing was broken by the vandalism of revolutionary soldiers and now is confined in a "quiet room" of a museum, because "the staff finds me too fierce." The *santo*'s discourse is more equivocal than edifying, describing itself as "a masterpiece of sorts—/ The perfect emblem of futility." "I stood beside a gilded altar where / The hopeless offered God their misery," the statue observes; "I became the hunger that they fed."

Yet this dour view of the superstitious worship of peasants is countered by the ambivalence of the revolutionaries who "hit me once—almost apologetically. // For even the godless feel something in a church, / A twinge of hope, fear? Who knows what it is?" The final stanza reveals that the import of the poem is mystery rather than doctrinal clarification. The damaged statue becomes an emblem of the inevitable attrition inflicted by history on man's already inadequate efforts to embody his faith:

> There are so many things I must tell
> God!
> The howling of the damned can't
> reach so high.
> But I stand like a dead thing nailed
> to a perch,
> A crippled saint against a painted
> sky.

Gioia writes about religion, but he neither preaches nor exults; rather he gives the theologians and preachers a vivid dramatization of the raw human longing and anxiety that they must try to explain and inform.

I have not mentioned the love poems and the poems about death in *Pity the Beautiful*, standard topics for lyrical poetry that Gioia handles as well as any of his contemporaries. I leave them to the reader, but I should be remiss to neglect mention of what may be the most striking work in this collection. In another essay, "The Dilemma of the Long Poem," Gioia laments that poets during the modern period have largely left the telling of stories to authors of prose fiction. He is convinced, rightly I judge, that poetry could play a more significant role in contemporary literary culture if poets would reclaim for verse its ancient task of narration. In previous volumes, both in translations and original works, Gioia has himself attempted to address this deficiency. In *Pity the Beautiful* he offers "Haunted," which as the title suggests is a ghost story (the poet's own fine spoken rendition is available on CD). I shall not give away the surprise ending (although it is a poem well worth rereading once the outcome is known). I shall only observe that its blank verse may remind many readers of Robert Frost's narratives in *North of Boston*; but instead of rural New England, the setting and events are more reminiscent of Henry James or Edith Wharton.

William Bedford Clark's *Blue Norther and Other Poems* is even shorter than Gioia's book, but Clark, too, provides ample variety

of theme and style in its brief compass. A Catholic like Gioia, Clark is more inclined to write explicitly religious poems. "Adoration at 2 a.m.," for instance, deals with the Roman Catholic practice of keeping vigil in shifts with other parishioners before the consecrated Host exposed on the altar, but the focus is on the personal experience of this rite for the ordinary Christian:

> Wife and daughters
> Asleep, you try to nap or
> channel-surf
> For innocent reruns, then shower,
> shave,
> Dress, read something (perhaps)
> appropriate,
> And drive into the early morning
> night.

Doctrine hardly intervenes except to stress the mystery so far beyond human ken, when the speaker takes the place of another man "Before the monstrance filled with What we seek / And repray old promises for an hour." The capital "W" and the nonce word "repray" are all the theology the poem offers.

The title of the last poem in the volume, "Humanae Vitae," is provocatively religious in view of the controversies over sexual morality during the past forty-five years; but Clark's approach is to stress the concrete meaning of Pope Paul VI's title, "Of Human Life," an inescapably carnal affair:

> Entangled in the heedless arms and
> legs of love,
> lovers do not lose time
> (the tool that hollows skulls),
> But set it tripping syncopate
> To beat of bodies hard with heated
> certainty.

Yet the carnality of sexual intercourse is also inescapably religious, since a man and woman thus joined "strain for Eden, where a fountain rose." Moreover, without making an argument, the poem reminds us that erotic rapture, left to its own, leaves a woman "Enraptured by the hungry tug at nipple's end." The full context "of human life" includes both the passion of the nuptial embrace and the passion of procreation.

Clark also writes occasional poems that ask us to put the events he chronicles in a broader frame. "Driving East after Rita," another poem that first appeared in *Modern Age*, depicts the devastation wrought on the Gulf Coast by a powerful hurricane. It begins with a stop for fuel: "The Pac-N-Go suggests Kirkuk, / but this Exxon was scarcely grazed." The allusion to the birthplace of Saddam Hussein, site of some of the worst violence and destruction in the wake of the American invasion of Iraq, reminds us that even the world's greatest superpower is vulnerable to nature:

> Now this once-ordered world stands
> out
> for what it is and always was—
> ungrateful quantum-haunted space.

The order imposed by men upon creation is, finally, as mortal as the men themselves.

" 'Katrina refugees return—weigh future' " appropriates a newspaper headline about another, even more ferocious hurricane that turned much of the Gulf coast to rubble. The speaker of the poem recognizes in a wire-service photograph of a refugee sifting through the remnants of her destroyed home a lover from the distant past who walked out on him:

> Decades ago, you wished her ill, and
> yet

Had hardly asked for this: Those
gulag eyes
Have left off questioning.

The "gulag eyes" are another allusion to the man-made horrors of the modern world, which seem to compete assiduously with natural catastrophe. In this instance, the realization of the universal vulnerability of human beings becomes a basis for the putting aside of long-nurtured rancor: "If curses work, then benediction stands a chance: / *Dread Lord bless mother, son, and all new mendicants*."

Like *Pity the Beautiful*, *Blue Norther* offers both intellectual sustenance and delight to any reader willing to spend the time necessary to read it with care. I cannot say whether any of the work in either of these volumes will be read in one hundred years or more—will become, that is, classic. As Dr. Johnson points out, this is a verdict handed down by history, and the jury will be out for a while yet. Nevertheless, I do affirm that many of the poems are memorable and able to generate a powerful field for reflection upon current events, to provide a matrix wherein our day-to-day lives can be considered in the context of history and tradition. Dana Gioia and William Bedford Clark are genuine poets, and their best efforts will remain in our consciousness and become richer and more luminous in our apprehension over time. Poetry, Wallace Stevens maintains, is the utterance of the mind's nobility, and "the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives." This would doubtfully be asserted of a tweet or of a headline from the news aggregator website *Newser* ("Read less, know more"). ■