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POETRY MATTERS

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This thesis has been approved  
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## POETRY MATTERS

EMILY E. GILLILAN

### ABSTRACT

Dana Gioia's controversial book *Can Poetry Matter?* challenges poets to write in traditional forms to expand poetry's readership beyond the "subculture" of the university. In response to Gioia's position, my thesis considers the mind-numbing trends in today's entertainment and places importance on innovation to suggest that there is potential danger in Gioia's call to conform. If the artists of a society mold their work like a commodity to be consumed by the masses, this lack of originality could stunt creative progress and hinder, rather than encourage, readers' interests. Gioia's position is currently a reference point for contemporary debates about poetry and society. My position offers a new suggestion to general readers: put forth individual effort and pursue professional instruction to learn how to read poetry in order to acquire a broader appreciation for the ways poetic form enriches communication. Furthermore, what is classified as difficult poetry depends upon the canon of a culture. Writers should not be required to reach a set audience or limit their innovation.

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## CHAPTER I

### DOES *CAN POETRY MATTER?* MATTER?

The canon is always in motion...because new structures are always being added to it by subsequent writers, thereby reshaping the possibilities of writing and of taste; but the evolving canon is not the creation of critics, but of poets.

Helen Vendler

The question “Can Poetry Matter?” presented first as the title of Dana Gioia's 1991 essay and later the title of his 1992 book, can be answered simply on an individual basis; yes it does. The title, in and of itself, accomplishes two goals: it causes enough indignation in poets and poetry readers (who already believe poetry matters) to draw them into the text, and the title also invokes intrigue from those uninterested in poetry by projecting their sentiment, poetry does not matter.

To an audience in the culture wars already disputing the limits of artistic expression, Dana Gioia made an explosive suggestion, that the university, by intellectualizing poetry, was the cause of poetry's dwindling audience. Not surprisingly,

considering the cultural and political clashes of the time, when "Can Poetry Matter?" first appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, 200 pieces of mail were received in response, more mail than had been received for any article in decades (Palattella and Kass). One year later, Gioia's *Can Poetry Matter?* was formally recognized as a finalist for a National Book Critics Circle Award in criticism. The book's message accumulated such significant support and opposition that *Graywolf Press* published a 10th-anniversary edition of *Can Poetry Matter?*, including an updated introduction in which Gioia comments on the unexpected commotion his article and book generated.

In the added introduction, Gioia highlights the points that evoked the most debate, mainly his presumptions that "...a larger and more diverse audience might be good for the art and that contemporary poetry might occupy a meaningful place outside the university" (xi). Most critics who address these presumptions dislike Gioia's methods for increasing readership and oppose his preference for reinstating traditional form and even traditional content. Additionally, some critics do not agree that poetry's audience is dwindling, that the university has caused its audience to dwindle, or even that a smaller audience is of great concern. The opposition gained a significant voice as "...hate mail arrived typed on the letterheads of university writing programs," and "newspapers and magazines ran articles on the essay. Reporters phoned for interviews. Radio and television producers scheduled shows. The essay was reprinted, recorded, excerpted, and translated" (Gioia xii). An academic conference was even held for panels to debate the accuracy and significance of Gioia's assertions.

Though the question posed in the titles of Gioia's article and book stirred much controversy and debate, there is some doubt to the significance of the question. In their 2002 article "Ten Years After, Poetry Still Matters" from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, John Palattella and Leon Kass question *Graywolf Press's* motive in publishing the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition since "...certain developments over the last decade have turned the title essay's argument into a historical curiosity." The developments Palattella and Kass discuss include the increased interest in spoken word poetry that has also awakened society's interest in poetry in general, the spread of the internet, and the diversity in America that have reshaped how the poetry community functions. In the initial release of his book, Gioia also discusses a recent increase in poetry publication. For example, 7,000 volumes of poetry were published in 1991, compared to the 264 poetry books published between 1931 and 1940, incidentally the time period Gioia refers to as "the golden age of poetry" (Palattella and Kass). Gioia wishes to make a case that because of the uniformity and sub par quality of the poetry being published, this increase in publication does not signify an increase in poetry's significance in society, especially since many of the books are exclusively circulating in the educational society of creative writing programs. In Gioia's added introduction to his 10<sup>th</sup>-anniversary edition, however, he seems to contradict his preference for quality writing.

In reaction to poetry's increased audience through the internet, Gioia states, "A skeptical critic might justifiably claim that never has so much bad poetry been presented to so many people, but that observation misses the bigger and more important fact. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a broad and diverse coalition of

Americans has created a public space for poetry" (xv). Gioia's preference to increase the numbers in poetry's readership at any cost (here the cost being quality) raises concern regarding his methods. Though Gioia wishes to diversify poetry's audience, it does not seem that he wants to allow poets to diversify their work.

As Gioia calls for an increased audience he promotes a set form of poetry he believes will reach the general reader, that is, traditional form. One form for anything, especially in American culture, does not suit when one considers the diversity that is represented. The doubt regarding the significance of Gioia's original question (does poetry matter, or can poetry matter) is due in part to the fact that the answer is obvious considering the diversity of American culture; yes, poetry matters to people in America. Palattella and Kass point to America's diversity that has potentially rendered Gioia's question "obsolete." The mere questioning, if a topic matters to no one, in the midst of such diversity must, because there will be unaccounted for individuals, anticipate an answer of uncertainty. Gioia's aim in his question excludes this fact that if poetry matters to one person for any reason, it *does* matter. His aim instead is to question poetry's impact, since contemporary poetry is not widely reaching general readers.

Although Gioia puts high expectations that are not necessarily beneficial or realistic on poets (for poets to write in traditional forms with traditional content, for poets to become the muses of society, and write realistically and straightforwardly as later discussed) some critics realize that poetry need not have any higher attribute than aesthetic value. Helen Vendler, for instance, discusses the lofty stipulations other critics have for poetry (civic, ethical, mimetic or communicative value) but establishes her

preference that aesthetic value can be “quite enough to claim for a poem” (39). What has aesthetic value is open to an individual's perspective.

Whether or not the recent increased interest in poetry has rendered Gioia's question insignificant, Gioia's message must be evaluated on an individual basis. Poetry's significance in society cannot be adequately measured by assessing poetry's marketability. Gioia wants poetry to be a commodity that sells well. As Gioia accuses creative writing professors of not publishing quality work, but publishing for “validation,” he also reveals his predisposition toward a specific model he thinks poetry should embody. Gioia compares the recent proliferation of poetry to the marketing of “subsidized farming that grows food no one wants” (8). Instead of having a poetry industry that “...has been created to serve the interests of the producers not the consumers,” Gioia asserts that poetry should serve the consumers' wants (8). Gioia's drive to commodify poetry is misguided. If the artists of a society mold their work like a commodity to be consumed, this lack of originality could stifle creative progress and hinder, rather than encourage, readers' interest. There is danger in writing to gratify general readers' desires. The reason the consumers should not be setting the standard of poetry is that general readers, the consumers Gioia is hoping to newly target, are not knowledgeable in the craft of poetry. Although Gioia judges a poet who creates work to gratify his or her own interests as selfish, requiring poets to write poetry that gratifies general readers' wants is not only feeding into general readers' selfish desires, but feeding into selfish desires that may have no relation to any type of excellence in poetry. For example, a general reader might want a poet to *only* write about the beauty of a sunset,

when the poet's aspiration is to display the man jumping off a bridge in the distant (an example of shaping a poem's content to meet the desire of a general reader). In a second example, a general reader may desire a poet to write clearly and use only vocabulary and syntax in formations that are easily recognizable, but a poet's agenda may be to utilize syntax and vocabulary to communicate meanings that would be impossible to express with simple vocabulary and traditional syntax.

Although Gioia believes efforts should be focused on making poetry more accessible and essentially easier to read, it is not guaranteed that these efforts will result in either a higher quality of poetry *or* increased interest. Rather than adopting Gioia's aim to reach general readers, an aim to perfect one's craft without an undue and unfitting burden to reach more general readers would more readily produce quality and innovative art, which should be the ultimate goal. Furthermore, with a proper understanding of America's diversity, Gioia's overarching label "general readers" is close to incomprehensible.

Helen Vendler expresses how counterproductive it can be for a poet to aim at being comprehensible to many: "...there is no need to worry about 'universality' or speaking for everyone...Perhaps all good poems are in this sense very odd, in order to be distinctive, to serve a restricted group of readers...in order to represent the very distinctions upon which experience and language depend" (40). A poet's first concern should be to craft language, not win an audience, and in crafting language, a poet should begin to establish an audience that could be spoken to through his or her writing, even if that audience is not already in existence. In fact, if a poet is achieving originality in his or

her writing, it is likely that he or she will be inventing new audiences to be reached and thereby expanding the established canon.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE'S AFFECT ON SOCIETY

When envisioning an ideal poetry readership and considering Dana Gioia's support of the recent Expansive Poetry movement (that prizes itself on using traditional forms to be more assessable to the general public), it is important to consider critics' claims on the interplay between the status of literature and the health of society. Ron McFarland highlights an important claim made by Ezra Pound in his 1934 *ABC's of Reading*: "If a nation's literature declines, the nation atrophies and decays" (28). Pound's claim may appear straightforward, but before its prediction is clear, a definition of audience, and criteria for measuring literature's decline must be agreed upon. Gioia's agenda for contemporary poetry seems to suffer from a preoccupation with numbers and personal taste. Both cause him to undervalue innovation and overvalue fame as being the highest goal for a poet to reach. Gioia's preoccupation with pushing for numbers in audience would likely cause him to also support Adrienne Rich's well-documented

opinion that Gertrude Stein's writing *cannot* reach an audience effectively (Gwiazda 175). This absolutist stance, however, fails to assess Stein's true reception in society being as it fails to consider what type of affect Stein's writing may have had on one individual. Just one from Stein's audience (whether that one is from a public or private audience) could be so affected by her writing that it revolutionized that person's understanding of communication or a specific topic from a poem. Furthermore, if that individual is or becomes a writer from Stein's influence, Stein's impact would reach any number of others in society by way of affecting that first person in her audience. Rich's stance speaks little to the fact that Stein's writing is still being taught in classrooms to this day, but does relate to Gioia's opinion, that the audience within that classroom is not substantial enough to sustain poetry's significance in society at large.

Part of what is at stake in Gioia's argument is his definition of audience. It is unclear why an audience of those in the university, or even a small audience of unnamed poetry enthusiasts outside the university, cannot be considered an important enough group to cause contemporary poetry to have a substantial place in society. Gioia chooses to measure poetry's significance by its diversity and population rather than by poetry's current audience's commitment to and scholarship of poetry. Additionally, there is a second issue at stake in the discussion of poetry's readership: whether or not it is necessary that many in a society appreciate and read poetry, rather than a select few. Gioia seems to think declining numbers in poetry's readership automatically means that the state of the craft has declined, but other critics do not share this opinion.

Contrary to Gioia's perspective, it is not a crime for many general readers to remain uninterested in poetry. It is natural for scholars to gravitate toward those topics they have taught, studied, and practiced. The more educated one is in a topic the more likely it is he or she will actively seek to become part of that topic's audience, especially since those with a background in the topic will be more equipped to take in new content and effectively appreciate innovation. If general readers declare that today's poetry is not for them and they refuse to consider putting forth the effort it may take to gain access, the opinion of John Pallattella and Leon Krass stands: "...would it be so terrible if the only readers of a poet's work at any one time were other poets, especially if those readers grasped, appreciated, and promoted the work?" Just because general readers comprehend language, it does not mean they always pursue, manipulate, celebrate, and create with language. A person's use of language does not automatically qualify that person as a potential poet or potential poetry reader. Anything that is worth comprehending or pursuing requires work. Expanding poetry's audience is an esteemed goal; however, the goal to reach new readers should not overstep the goal to write effective poems, ones that celebrate the unique form of poetic expression and push toward new forms of poetic expression.

## CHAPTER III

### THE HISTORY OF POOR RECEPTION

Gioia's concern about the state of poetry's readership is actually not new, nor is he the only contemporary attempting to newly engage general readers. From the very start of Ted Kooser's *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*, Kooser echoes Gioia's claim that "...finding an audience" is a first concern in "...making your poems stronger and more effective" (xi). Kooser's aim through his book is to reach an everyday, and hopefully untrained, writer with whom he can share his views on publication and techniques toward achieving success in poetry through publication. With a burdensome discussion on the importance of reaching an audience, Kooser does suggest an interesting technique to keep in mind while writing. Upholding his most prized understanding of why poetry is important—it being a unique form of communication—Kooser states, "I recommend that when you sit down to write you have in mind an imaginary reader, some person you'd like to reach with your words" (20). Kooser's above suggestion actually echoes Adreinne

Rich's discussion of how to write for an audience that is highlighted by Piotr Gwiazda :  
"There is an audience of those unknown to you but whom your words are going to reach. You can't know them in advance, but you can hope for them, desire them" (Gwiazda 172). Rich's idea of not being able to know one's audience in advance is interestingly different from what Gioia is requesting, and even what Kooser is requesting. Rich's idea more readily matches the writing concept of creating a new audience by writing with innovation, rather than shaping one's craft to fit an existing audience's desires. It is, after all, not general readers or even critics who should be shaping the evolution of the canon, but poets, as Helen Vendler stated. Writing to an undetermined audience, or an imagined audience could be a helpful tool so long as the audience does not become an obsessive center of every poem. Constantly concerning oneself with how a reader will perceive one's poem may detract a writer from his or her original point of expression.

Tony Hoagland, another contemporary, also shares Gioia and Kooser's preference for poetry to be unfettered, unhampered of too much complexity or difficulty that could deter general readers from engaging with poems. This preference is expressed in his 2006 *Real Sofistikashun*. Hoagland, however, is less forceful about this preference, and though his writing tips are for the general reader, he also warns that his writing is for those who enjoy thinking about poetry. Hoagland states that his essays "...are intended for the reader who loves poems and likes to think about them" (xiii). In this statement Hoagland recognizes that poetry may not be a topic for every general reader, which is a more realistic stance. Hoagland seems to recognize that poets should not be required to sell their work to all general readers.

As introduced above, in addition to the contemporaries who are concerned with the problems in poetry's readership, disconnect between audience and art is not a new concern. Ron McFarland traces this trend of concern back to the time of Shakespeare, but acknowledges what is current in Gioia's claim--his willingness to blame the university. McFarland notes that excellence in art has often been coupled with lukewarm reception from the general public. In act II scene ii of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, several visiting players discuss Aeneas's account of the fall of Troy, and Hamlet comments that the excellent play "twas caviary to the general" (Delahoyde). Hamlet's comment has been interpreted to mean "something akin to pearls before swine, the 'general' being the general public" (Delahoyde). Though this example is not taken directly from a real-life setting, the concern about excellence being lost on a general audience is represented poignantly, and the example may offer insight into art's reception during the time *Hamlet* was written. Considering general audiences' tendencies toward ineptitude when it comes to comprehending excellent art as well as the history behind Gioia's concern, a potential new reason for declining readership comes to light: increasing numbers of untrained readers coupled with high quality art outside familiar canons.

Reading new forms of writing does not come naturally to many general readers since many are unaware of how society has trained them to read within a canon. Obviously, lessening one's creativity or beginning even to write personal poetry will initially reach a larger audience because it is the type of poetry that is written on a lazy afternoon when grandma notices the sunshine hitting her rose garden with a particular hue and feels warmed. Her words to express the sentimental are sincere, but stale.

Although an immediate audience might be gained through the efforts of Gioia to stifle the expansion of new forms and new content, it does not follow that better poetry will be created, and his complaint about too much bad poetry passing as good will likely become worse, not better.

Although Gioia does not lead a reader to understand that there are differing opinions regarding poetry's current state of reception, there are in fact polarized understandings among critics regarding the health and diversity of poetry's current reception. Generally, there are two issues in discussion among contemporary poetry critics regarding reception: how the current state of poetry should be evaluated (either as flourishing with new forms and different content or gravely declining); and second, whether this change in poetry has been caused by the university or some other factor. The university is only one part of a society. To understand a disconnect between art and society, one must comprehend what societal factors are currently influencing the reception of art. McFarland does not fully blame poets for a decline in readership as other critics have. He instead considers the possibility of general society being out of sync with the evolving imaginations of artists. McFarland upholds Delmore Schwartz's idea that poets' loss of intimate contact with society and general readers "...was not so much the (fault of the) poet as it was poetry, culture, sensibility, imagination that were isolated" (29). In the earlier example, Shakespeare was also commenting on the idea of separation between the imagination of the public and art, in the lines given to Hamlet ("twas caviary to the general"). The question Hamlet raised was of course not questioning the quality of

the play, but instead lamenting that though the work was superior, the public did not have the sensibility or training to appreciate the art.

As evidenced in Shakespeare's work about his time, today's culture also suffers from a separation between art and general society. Now, in the "Information Revolution," much of the popular entertainment does not require effort on the part of the audience, and the audience is bombarded with entertainment (Zengotita 34). In "The Numbing of the American Mind: Culture as Anesthetic" Thomas de Zengotita details how today's culture is saturated with technologically engaging sensationalism that "[fires] message modules straight for [our] gonads, [our] taste buds, [our] vanities, [our] fears. These modules seek to penetrate, but in a passing way. A second of [our] attention is all they ask" (36). In result, today's minds are conditioned to only focus on any one thing for a few seconds or minutes before expecting to be gratified in some way. To cope with being bombarded, Zengotita states, people "surf" above the chaos in a state of numbness toward things that really matter. Though Zengotita concludes that all this bombardment leads to people having overly busy lives and minds that rob them from simple joys, this numbness from entertainment overload also causes unwillingness to put forth effort to achieve gratification or learn something new. An audience that is gratified through little to no effort does not align well with the imaginative, expansive forms of contemporary poetry, which require both knowledge of what poetry does, and effort to obtain a level of comprehension. Furthermore, poets, and especially the university, cannot be single-handedly held responsible for the changing trends in a society.

Gioia's perspective that creative writing programs create mind-numbing uniformity is different from the perspective that society causes mind numbing. Gioia believes the mind-numbing uniformity created in creative writing programs deters general readers from viewing contemporary poetry as having intellectual or creative worth. In contrast to Gioia is McFarland's view that the current state of poetry is "flourishing" and "non-monolithic" (30). Responding to Gioia and other critics' perception of the current state of contemporary poetry McFarland states:

...given the huge amount of [poetry] being published (as all the detractors decry) it is predictably varied in every way (form, voice, mode) and it is predictably difficult to identify just two or three dominant poets, a judgment best left to time anyway. The nature of poetry has never been as non-monolithic and as difficult to characterize as it is now, and the extent to which we may still be able to describe poets as 'personal,' 'environmental,' 'politically committed,' 'formalist,' and so on serves only to confute the argument that the supposed 'academicization' has produced sameness. (McFarland 29)

Since the state of the craft (whether poetry is declining, flourishing, monolithic or non-monolithic) is a matter of perception, the only substantial response to Gioia revolves around how poetic craft relates to its audience.

## CHAPTER IV

### POETRY IN THE MARKET

Piotr Gwiazda details Adrienne Rich's appreciation of the undesirable nature of making poetry into a mere commodity. Rich stated in a conversation with Bill Moyers, "I don't want my poetry to be consumed" as a commodity in a market (Gwiazda 171). Gwiazda discusses the details of what that model applied to poetry would look like:

When one writes for the market, one sees oneself in a producer-consumer type of relationship with one's readers; this arrangement posits writing as essentially a business operation involving such activities as packaging, advertising, and selling. (171)

Gioia does consider the undesirable nature of this setup to an extent in his chapter entitled "The Successful Career of Robert Bly" from *Can Poetry Matter?*. Gioia expresses his

dissatisfaction with the type of fame Robert Bly acquires for himself, in which Bly utilizes a type of self-advertising rather than purely his poetry to earn popularity.

Gioia actually expresses a level of disgust in Robert Bly's self-promotions through self-marketing (public personality) that earned him fame that was not sponsored solely on the merit of his writing. In Gioia's chapter "The Successful Career of Robert Bly" Gioia asks the question, "what use is poetry that cannot speak to its contemporary audience without the support of intermediary prose?" (161). Gioia adds some contradiction to his disapproval though. While Gioia upholds a poet's relevance to general readers as being the most important aspect of a poet's writing, Gioia makes his assessment of Robert Bly more complex by championing him as an example of poetic success even though Bly's relevance and fame came through self-promotion more than through his poems (according to Gioia). Gioia admits that Bly's relevance and measure of excellence came through the packaging, not his writing, and yet Gioia still states that Bly is "one of the most famous and influential poets now writing in America" (147). Beyond Gioia's recognition of Bly's success, at the end of the chapter, Gioia does ask readers to see through Bly's "sales pitch" and critically examine his writing (162). As for the quality in Bly's writing, Gioia asks readers to put forth "effort" to "push through all the dullness" in Bly's poems, which may not deliver what is advertised (162). Here, Gioia is recognizing the fact that it is not just poets who need to work to have a successful place in society, but readers. My suggestion for reader's place in reinstating poetry in society is much more explicit. Readers should seek training in order to comprehend contemporary poetry.

Helen Vendler poses a new reason for why the general public does not read contemporary poetry; it is that they are not being taught to read poetry. Vendler states, “Poetry is not systematically and intensively taught in America as it is in Europe. Each European nation cherishes its poetry (and the classical poetry born on the same soil from which it grew) as part of the deposit of patriotism, and therefore institutionalizes it in the schools” (35). The only possibility in including more general readers into the experience and readership of poetry is to educate them on how to read poetry, and promote interest in that fashion. If general readers build a knowledge of poetry and what types there are, they can step outside their familiar canons and explore more elaborate uses of language.

## CHAPTER V

### INNOVATORS: GERTRUDE STEIN & PICCASO

When Gioia accuses L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets within the university of crafting poems that fail to be accessible to general readers, he presumes poets are writing in complex and confusing forms on purpose. It is possible, even in the most elaborate poems, that poets are using the best form to communicate their content and not purposely being difficult. Gioia has not considered the point that some content, being difficult in itself, requires a “difficult” form to be effectively expressed. Marjorie Perloff discusses this point in "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry in the Eighties" from *The Dance of the Intellect* noting that “for (Charles) Olson and (Robert) Creeley, ‘Form is never more than the extension of content’ (218). Furthermore, Gioia’s argument that L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry fails to communicate anything of consequence to its readers (because of its difficulty) does not hold up since poetry is an art crafted through language, and language is the basis of communication. Vendler clarifies this point:

“Because language is the medium of poetry, and language cannot, when used according to any of the possible rules of its coding, not communicate, there is, it seems to me, no need to worry about poetry’s ‘communicating’ itself” (40). Gertrude Stein, for example, was very aware of the meaning words held, and she labored to free words from their traditional meanings in order to express new ideas through both her content and form.

Eric Neel describes how "Gertrude Stein's prose poem 'Patriarchal Poetry' meditates on the limits of a limiting vocabulary" and "...repeatedly asks us to imagine new relationships with the words on the page" (88). The following excerpt from "Patriarchal Poetry" utilizes seemingly meaningless repetition in order to cause a reader to encounter the labor women experience in a patriarchal society:

For before let it before to be before spell to be before to be before to have to be to  
be for before to be tell to be to having held to be to be for before to call to be for  
to be before to till until to be till before to be for before to be until to be for before  
to for to be for before will for before to be shall to be to be for to be for to be  
before still to be will before to be before for to be to be for before to be before  
such to be for to be much before to be for before will be for to be for before to be  
well to be well before to be before for before might while to be might before to be  
might while to be might to be for before to for while to be while for before while  
before to for which as for before had for before had for before to for to before.

(Stimpson and Chessman)

The phrases "to have to be," in the first couple lines, and "to be well," in the later lines of this excerpt stand out amongst the other word groupings that are out of traditional usages of syntax. The repetition surrounding these phrases give them much more significant meaning than they would have had, were they stated in a more "accessible" format. The point in this excerpt is for the reader to experience the text, not just read it.

Perloff discusses Stein's success in progressive communication in poetry with the following statement: "But words, as even Gertrude Stein recognized, have meanings, and the only way to MAKE IT NEW is not to pretend that meaning doesn't exist but to take words out of their usual contexts and create new relationships among them" (*The Poetics* 75). One can take the example of Pablo Picasso's work, for instance, which was greatly rejected by the established art community during the time he painted. Gertrude Stein quotes Picasso as having commented on his reception in the art community:

Picasso said to me once with a good deal of bitterness, they say I can draw better than Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino) and probably they are right, perhaps I do draw better but if I can draw as well as Raphael I have at least the right to choose my way and they should recognize it, that right, but no, they say no.

(Stein16)

In the above conversation, Picasso laments rejection by an audience that, though they believe he has a gift for drawing, does not desire to expand their taste to include Picasso's innovative style. The rejection of Picasso's new form relates well to Gioia's rejection of contemporary L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. The danger of course is, from Picasso's

example, if contemporary poets are discouraged from creating new forms, influential masterpieces may be thwarted. One cannot be overly confident in one's ability to measure the significance of a piece of art in the era it is produced. In Picasso's example, his work became influential over time as society's values caught up with his, sometimes considered outrageous, depictions. Were Picasso to have curbed his art to be more accessible to what the established community desired, his art would have not been his own, and society would suffer at the loss of his work. Gertrude Stein discusses how Picasso's uniqueness was a type of excellence: "...when he ate a tomato the tomato was not everybody's tomato, not at all and his effort was not to express in his way the things seen as everyone sees them, but to express the things as he was seeing it" (Stein 17). It seems outrageous to ask an artist to express his art in a way that an audience desires, since an artist, by definition, expresses him or herself through a mode of creation that has never been expressed precisely that way before. The only audience that is qualified to make such demands is an audience that is trained in the art. Even then, those trained in the art are not gifted with the ability to predict the impact current art will have on audiences in future eras.

## CHAPTER VI

### FUTURE ERAS

A discussion of the epigraph that begins Gioia's fifth chapter, “The Loneliness of Weldon Kees” offers further depth to the discussion on future era's recognition of artworks' significance. The excerpt from Randall Jarrell's *An Unread Book* reads :

When we think of the masterpieces that nobody praised and nobody read, back there in the past, we feel an impatient superiority to the readers of the past. If we had been there, we can't help feeling, we'd have known that Moby-Dick was a good book—why, how could anyone help knowing? (55)

Although Gioia uses the epigraph to represent how Kees' poetry was uncelebrated, Jarrell's assessment of readers' undue sense of superiority relates greatly to Gioia's prescription for the improvement of poetry in today's culture. Although Gioia seems unaware that his request for poets to utilize traditional forms is also a request to taper

their innovation, he remains fully unaware of the demise that may follow this tapering. Rather than future readers sitting back and pondering how 21st century readers could have failed to recognize the brilliance of a specific L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poem, that poem may never have been written (if the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet followed Gioia's request).

Today's language poets, including Ron Silliman and Charles Bernstein are creating art with their language in that they, like Stein, work to free readers' minds from traditional usages of words. In Marjorie Perloff's view, what these language poets are doing is revolutionary and important. Perloff comments on how these poets "lament the 'invisibility' of language in our 'literary' culture" (*The Dance* 234). She quotes Silliman as stating, "The words...are never our own. Rather, they are our own usages of a determinate coding passed down to us like all other products of civilization" (Perloff *The Dance* 234). For someone who loves art or any originality in the use of language, this understanding of coding seems detrimental, until a poet labors to free words from their traditional meanings, or to place words in a form that can allow them to say something new. Charles Bernstein's "Further Color Notes" gives an excellent example of an experimental form with innovative content.

#### Further Color Notes

Pg. 5, should be lighter red in circle and more orange in curtains

Pg. 8, lighter and brighter overall

Pg. 9, too dark, lighter, more orange

Pg. 12, move up image so more of red bottom line shows

Pg. 13, Blake's babe, lighter red around the snake

Pg. 14, include more of the snake at bottom, try not to cut off image

Pg. 18, flowers should be more orange  
Pg. 20, red should be more orange  
Pg. 21, rainbow should have a lighter orange band  
Pg. 25, cross should be lighter, more orange in background behind heart shape  
Pg. 32, brighter fluorescent orange  
Pg. 33, brighter orange line from one bird to other bird, brighter yellow  
Pg. 34, brighter pinks and yellows  
Pg. 35, brighter yellow around cloud  
Pg. 37, orange line around type box  
Pg. 38, lighter if possible overall

In "Further Color Notes" Bernstein draws upon the traditional one stanza format to newly comment on everyday professional, straight forward (and potentially boring) language.

The visual "Pg." with numbers on the left side prepares a reader to encounter an unusual poem, one that may seem strikingly unlike a poem, but causes a reader to reevaluate what makes a poem a poem. Bernstein here asks a reader to recognize that a poem need not have traditional sentences to communicate as a uniformed piece of language, for poems, by nature, speak as a unified message, rather than a message that builds paragraph by paragraph. Here again, the method of expression is focused on a reader's encounter with the poem, which is an experience, not just a read-through. Beyond the love of art, a lack of innovation will influence a culture toward atrophy, as suggested earlier in Ezra Pound's statement. The question remains, how can literacy and poetry's readership in America increase?

## CHAPTER VII

### DIFFICULTY IN POETRY

Gioia is right to recognize that quality in writing should be a priority as one attempts to improve literacy and poetry's readership. Donald Hall's discussion of Horace's (Quintus Horatius Flaccus) suggestion from the *Ars Poetica* offers an additional perspective to consider in relation to Gioia's concept for how to maintain quality in writing. Horace suggested that "...poets [should] keep their poems home for ten years" before circulating them for publication (Hall 96). This idea parallels a concept from T.S. Eliot that Gioia upholds. T.S. Eliot finds it disgusting when poets write poems "when they [have] nothing new to say" (Gioia 121). These lofty expectations, the first more so than the second, seem to be more of a hindrance on a writer's efforts. Furthermore, it is unclear how writers will improve their own writing by constantly relying on their own perception of their work as they keep a piece of writing locked away for ten years. In response to Gioia's suggestion to always say something new, it seems difficult to imagine a writer having nothing new to say, unless nothing new to say means nothing of

consequence by someone else's terms. The idea of what is new, is so much driving what the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets of today compose, and yet, Gioia wishes for them to retire this trend because it is beyond the comprehension of those who have not expensed effort to learn to read poetry.

Marjorie Perloff discusses this tension between "quick-access" poetry (often revolving around sentimentality) and difficult, elaborate poetry. There is a temptation to them in writing to only focus on personal poems, but with this temptation often comes a misunderstanding--that sentimentality equals sincere, even emotionally moving writing, merely because it is honest. Perloff discusses why personal poetry can be a safe yet unsuccessful style:

One can take on the very public discourses that seem so threatening and explore their poetic potential. To do this is to recognize that "I look straight into my heart & write the exact words that come from within" are already coded by the historical and social context in which they function. (Perloff 234)

If a writer has experience with and a depth of knowledge about the use of language, and he or she can easily recognize over-used clichés and staleness in content, and in addition, prize innovation above personal sentiment, there is no problem in writing something a poet considers personal, or even sentimental. Too many writers, however, fall into the trap of thinking that since their writing is sincere, and others are touched by it, it is in fact good writing. This matter can be evidenced by many internet poetry sites that are filled

with sentimental, personal poetry, and followed with comments of praise from other readers. Critical reviews of those sites, however, prove to be revealing. In "Clicking on the Web," an overview of online poetry sites, Boyd Collins states, "If anything suggests the inadequacy of web search tools, it is trying to find decent poetry on the Internet." This discrepancy again highlights the danger of allowing general readers (those who favorably review many poorly written poems on internet sites, for example) to shape the motion of poetry's canon.

The danger that continues to plague Gioia's mode for creating interest in poetry is the fact that an audience that is unknowledgeable about poetry should not be the controlling factor of the way poetry should progress. Similarly, if one were to take a public that has no knowledge of art and walk them through a modern art museum, of course they would be drawn toward anything (painting, drawing, photograph, or sculpture) that has relevance to their immediate lives. The nagging question continues, as Gioia wishes it to, "Isn't poetry supposed to be communicating, and communicating effectively?" Yes. But not differently than science is supposed to be communicating effectively.

Imagine if a top scientist were to take the blueprints of his new robot and make them accessible to the public. It would be possible, but all the details that are new and complex and innovative will need to be removed or condensed in order that the public view the final product. With art, as poetry is, if it is dumbed down in order to reach general readers, it is a different piece altogether. The use of language in creation is no less complex than the use of science or any other medium. Just as it would be a tragedy to

stifle the progress of science in order that it, at each stage, be accessible to the public (and think of what advancements might have been hindered due to a stalled progress) it would be tragic to shape and stifle the progress of poetry, in order that general readers be included or drawn into it. Unfortunately, language is put in a separate category because we all use it, and since language is so commonplace and used daily, we like to think of ourselves as experts in the use of it, and therefore also critics in the use of it.

In his call for poets to interact with society in a meaningful way, Gioia also calls for poets to embrace an unrealistic level of realism in their poetry. Gioia laments that:

At its best our poetry has been private rather than public, intimate rather than social, ideological rather than political. It has discussed symbolic places rather than real ones, even when it has given the symbols real names. It dwells more easily in timeless places than historical ones. For many reasons--some of them compelling--most of our poets have rejected the vernacular of educated men and tried to develop conspicuously personal and often private languages of their own.

(113)

With these remarks, Gioia fails to advocate for the freedom of creativity in poetry that transcends the exactness of facts to favor introducing readers to new types of truth, truths about human experience, not street names and numbers, and if not human experience, than the expanse of human imagination, which too is a triumph. The idea represented in Gioia's chapter "Business and Poetry," that today's poets seem to leave their careers to go home and invent rebellious new languages to enjoy, does represent Gioia's prejudice

against contemporary new styles. He feels today's poets are self-centered and that, in part, is what has caused the decline in audience, poets' lack of concern for who will read their work.

Though, the idea of creating new languages is meant to be a criticism from Gioia, the idea of always writing with the same language seems more of a criticism. It is possible that rather than today's poet's having "lost [their] sense of addressing a public" that instead, poets imagine a new public, and hope to write well enough to inspire that audience into existence (Gioia 113). For example, before one's interest in poetry is awakened there is no audience in that individual for poetry. It is not until that individual chooses to train or open his or her mind to the opportunity to be brought into an experience of poetry that he or she has an ear to hear poetry. A related concept is discussed in "Don't Let Stereotypes Warp Your Jugement" by Robert Heilbroner. Heilbroner states, "It is a curious fact that if we don't know what we're looking at, we are often quite literally unable to see what we're looking at." The same goes for reading language. Before one is taught to read, letters have no meaning. Before one learns to read poetry through instruction or individual effort, a poem's meaning may be completely lost on a reader.

Gioia also wants to expand readers' literacy as he desires variety in poetry; it is surprising, however, how he defines variety. In Gioia's chapter, "The Dilemma of a Long Poem," he suggests that the current poetry being published during the early nineties (and presumably still today) is a bore because of lack of diversity, but the diversity Gioia calls for is the traditional forms of "verse romances, ballads, hymns, verse drama, didactic

stacts, burlesques, satires, the songs actually meant to be sung, and even the pastoral eclogues" (24). Gioia is then so bold to suggest that in today's poetry, "important ideas [are] no longer discussed at length" (24). Although he may be focusing on the part that states "at length," it is quite obtuse to become a self-appointed judge of what types of content in poetry are more significant than others. In addition there is a shift in focus that occurs in the line that takes Gioia away from the mere calling for traditional form into a calling for traditional (perhaps highbrow) content. Gioia then closes the opening paragraph of the chapter by claiming his imagined eighteenth-century reader would be unable to classify the current poems beyond the assessment as "the epics of this age," and would thereafter decide the works "belonged to a genre whose rules he didn't understand" (23). And isn't that the point? How boring would it be to the eighteenth century reader to be catapulted into the future only to be disappointed in finding that the poetry of today represents exactly what the poetry of his time covers. It would be quite a waste of time travel to say the least, and quite a show of lack of imagination.

Gioia even seems to poke fun at contemporary poets' innovative forms. In the chapter, "Business and Poetry," Gioia contemplates reasons behind why today's poets work hard to develop experimental, "private literary languages" (115). Gioia's suggestion draws from the most common business pursued by poets, collegiate careers, and conjectures: " Perhaps after a full working day of no-nonsense talk in the office, these poets received a rebellious pleasure at night from writing extravagantly" (116). It is unclear why new forms of expression with language would be considered rebellious. A new form is no more rebellious than a woman today wearing pants comfortably when she

could have only, according to the society, worn a dress comfortably in previous times. Most creative geniuses come in the space away from the demands of society. Poetry would never have evolved were it not for those persons who, behind closed doors "rebellious[ly]" explored language. Interestingly, Gioia criticizes today's poets for exploring language as an escape from their boring day-to-day work, but then upholds his opinion that Wallace Stevens "...left a valuable heritage of how language could be used aggressively in poems" (117). Gioia also upholds the point that aspects of Stevens' work required being at home, and "letting himself go by inventing foreign-sounding words and names" (116). Perhaps there is a limit Gioia believes today's poets have crossed, a limit that, for the most part, Stevens did not overstep, and was therefore still able to connect with an audience.

The idea of difficulty in poetry is viewed as tragic, even deadly to poetry's readership according to Gioia, but not all critics share this view. Vernon Shetley notes T.S. Eliot's statement that "poets in our civilization must be difficult" because society continues to become more and more complex, so current art must match these conditions (1). The discussion regarding difficulty in poetry starts with a proper understanding of how a culture's canon functions. Everyone learns to read under a canon. If something is outside the canon, society generally rejects it as incomprehensible. Shetley upholds the perspective that a society's canon greatly influences what types of writing individuals perceive as difficult. However, Shetley states, "I begin from the premise that difficulty is not an inherent quality of texts but rather a particular kind of relation between author and reader... Difficulty is less a property of texts themselves than of ways in which

institutions train us to read” (4). If a theorist accepts Shetley's assessment of difficulty in texts as being a relationship between readers, texts, and how one is trained to read in a society, that theorist must understand Gioia's request to adjust the current canon as a request to shape or uphold society's *perception* of what is difficult. At the very least, a theorist in agreement with Shetley must accept that Gioia's aim is to have new poetry match what society perceives as less difficult (rather than new poetry needing to merely be less difficult). This is a subtle but important difference. This concept makes Gioia's concern revolve around society's learning rather than poets' disconnect from society. The question then becomes, why is it better for society to reject new forms of poetry in favor of more traditional forms (since difficulty in texts is a learned perception)?

Shetley even classifies each part of readers' trained perceptions of difficulty. In summary of those parts Shetly lists:

No text is easy or difficult outside the norms and standards of the community that determines: 1) what is necessary and sufficient knowledge; 2) what is an adequately framed discussion of the text...; and 3) what is an appropriate aesthetic disposition toward the text. (4)

The third category, “what is an appropriate aesthetic disposition toward the text,” reveals how even one's simple measure of taste, which causes him to prefer one type of poem over another, is learned. Learned taste would be more effectively exposed if an experiment were conducted to equate reading preferences of a society with a society's canon. For example, if L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry were to be included in every

newspaper and every elementary level English class, it is likely that society's "aesthetic disposition toward" L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry would be favorable. In addition, society would most likely *not* regard L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry as difficult, unless it was taught as such.

## CHAPTER VIII

### POETS' PUBLIC PROFILE

Gioia does admit that there is importance to having "intensity in language," "intellectual rigor," and "surprising originality" in poetry, all aspects which Gioia suggests the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry movement has developed (113). However, Gioia makes his perspective clear, that these developments were gained at the expense of poets' efforts to connect with an audience and be accessible (113). As Gioia makes his plea for poets to make their writing more accessible to be digested by general readers, he also suggests the type of public position poets should take. In his chapter, "The Anonymity of the Regional Poet," Gioia states that Weldon Kees' best poems have a personal but not public element (91). This statement grants more specification to how Gioia hopes for poets to make their poetry more accessible. Though one might expect Gioia to require poets to add a "public" element to their poetry, instead, in this chapter, Gioia comments on the success of Weldon Kees' poems that are "intimate without being

private, never obscure but also never public" (91). The general idea Gioia hopes to impress upon poets in this suggestion is for poets to use specific life experiences to relate to others' specific life experiences, and this is done not by directly addressing the public, but by sharing from a personal perspective. Though these writing directions may seem to grant flexibility on how to reach the general public, Gioia is actually, and simply, presenting one type of content that can be expressed in poetry and not a general outline for how to approach the writing of all poetry.

In addition to the type of content Gioia believes poets should include in their writing, Gioia also prescribes a specific, public mode for learning and enjoying poetry: public readings and memorization. Gioia does note an exception to this preferred mode for enjoyment of poetry. Gioia notes Kees' distaste for public performance and does not rebuke any lack of reaching the public because of this fact. There is an allusion at the end of the "The Anonymity of the Regional Poet" chapter, however, on Kees' measured success, and it can be surmised that part of what deterred Kees from achieving great fame was his lack of public performance. Gioia views the public profile of a poet as being of great importance to the health of the craft, but not in the way of self-promotion (as seen in the earlier example of Robert Bly), but through the authentic proliferation of one's poetry do to its superior quality.

The question needs still to be asked regarding Gioia's requests for contemporary poets, why must poets again become the muses of society, as Gioia upholds they once were? Gioia has an unreasonable and even naive desire for poets to "assume the pose of a prophet or professor instructing the unenlightened" (91). Gioia upholds a weighty

distinction for poets as "[representing] the collective memory of their culture" and suggests that metered poems have an elevated power of "hypnotically releasing the unconscious" (30). Hopefully, historians are not basing their facts on the "collective memory" of poets, and psychotherapists are not relying on their patients reading verse to be healed. Gioia's outlandish expectations for poets seem to expose the fact that his agenda for poetry's progress is being sourced by his own personal taste. Gioia leaves the goal of poets regaining their rightful place as muses as if it were an obvious improvement from the place poetry and poets currently hold, but many other types of growth need to be considered before settling on Gioia's goal.

One goal for example could be for poets to be seen for who they are—those who create with, manipulate, and enjoy communicating through different forms of language. There is a need to break through the understanding of poets as prophets or muses of a society. As Tom Bethell states, "We have been brainwashed into thinking that it is our civic responsibility to admire anyone who comes before us as a poet" (Bethell 50). Although Bethell is making the previous remark to oppose lower quality writing, it is true that this remark relates to the undue pressure placed on poets. Society supposes that well-crafted language equals profound wisdom when in actuality it is possible for a poet to offer a level of wisdom through his or her writing that is no more profound than what is offered through any other profession; what a poet offers is a unique way of communicating that message. To measure a decline in poetry, one should assess the uniqueness of the communication, and potentially the uniqueness of the topic, not necessarily the accessibility or the wisdom, as Gioia suggests.

Gioia's measure of success in a poet's career, that is, fame, seems to relate to his aim for poetry to make something happen; it is unclear, however, what change is significant enough to be classified as "something happen[ing]" (44). As Gioia goes into detail describing the importance of Robinson Jeffers' career, he makes a claim about the climate of today's American culture, labeling it as "... a culture where most intellectuals agree that 'poetry makes nothing happen'" (44). On an individual basis, especially in the lives of poets and aspiring poets, poetry changes much; particularly, poetry expands the minds of those who read it, in order to allow their minds to better enjoy language.

Palattella and Kass uphold Eliot Weinberger's explanation for why poetry may appear to be less significant in today's culture: "American poetry 'was once a village where neighbors chatted and feuded. Now American poetry is a little nation of citizens who are unknown to each other, a federation of cantons where the passes are snowed in and the wires are down.'" Whether the state of poetry reception has changed since the first publication of Gioia's article or the general public's voice has just been made more audible, it is clear that Gioia hit a topic of significance from the amount of discussion it sponsored. It is likely that the significant amount of discussion that was generated because of Gioia's article and book more greatly proves how thriving poetry's audience is, as apposed to how poetry's current audience is dwindling. Those who do not care about a topic, would not take the time to send mail in support or in opposition.

## CHAPTER IX

### POETRY'S CANON WILL ADVANCE

In opposition to Gioia, my suggestion for the expansion of readership is not to require writers to conform and stifle their craft, but instead to encourage readers inside and outside the university to put forth individual effort in their reading discipline to learn how to read poetry, and thereafter acquire a broader appreciation for how variety in poetic form enriches communication. Good poetry, is not, as Gioia quotes Bruce Bawer as stating, "...a fragile thing," and it is sure that no critic can successfully inhibit the advance of the poetic canon (8). If anything, a critic's review of poetry will do no more than fall short of matching the significance of the poem being reviewed (if it is of good quality). For as Helen Vendler notes, when critics write about poetry, their critical discussions are muffled and irrelevant in comparison to the art that speaks for itself. A good poem, as many critics have stated in their own way, breathes on its own, so it is

unlikely that any drama stirred by Gioia's requests will ever completely stifle the progress of innovative poets, so long as those poets devote themselves first to their craft.

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet Ron Silliman has responded to the question Gioia and others in are asking, in an interview with Sinda Gregory:

SG: Aren't you ever tempted, though, to create the kinds of works that would cut across these audience barriers, allow you to appear on "The Johnny Carson Show" and make a fortune?

RS: If I were interested in writing for the mass audience I would write for television or the cinema. This whole issue is a very tricky area: there is a great desire on the part of many writers to speak plainly to everybody. But "speaking plainly" is just one code of stylistic density among many others. There is no such thing as "natural language"; there are only *learned languages*. And there is no such thing as naturalism in literature. It, too, is simply an affected style. At the same time, there is no such thing as "simple individuals." (McCaffery and Gregory)

Silliman clarifies the idea that although general readers may perceive complex forms of poetry to be deliberately difficult, the style of complex forms is merely an unfamiliar one, or an unlearned language, as Silliman suggests.

To close, let us consider taking advice from Gioia who states in his "Notes on the New Formalism" chapter:

In my own poetry I have always worked in both fixed and open forms... experience in each mode provided an illuminating perspective on the other... I find it puzzling therefore that so many poets see these modes as opposing aesthetics rather than as complementary techniques. Why shouldn't a poet explore the full resources the English language offers? (40-41).

To which I wish to ask Gioia's same question. "Why shouldn't a poet explore the full resources the English language offers," even if that exploring steps outside of an existing audience and canon (41)?

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