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A Review of Dana Gioia's *The Gods of Winter*William Matthew McCarter, Southwestern Illinois College

Dana Gioia is one of the most interesting contemporary American poets. Born in Los Angeles in 1950, Gioia was the first member of his family to attend college. After earning a BA and an MBA from Stanford University, Gioia also earned an MA in Comparative Literature from Harvard University. Gioia began his career in business in 1977 and eventually became a Vice Presdient of what is now Kraft General Foods. While Gioia was making his mark in corporate America, he never gave up his love of writing poetry. Finally, in 1992, Gioia left the business world to become a full time writer. Since then, he has received numerous awards for his work.

Gioia's Can Poetry Matter? is one of the most influential pieces of contemporary criticism and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. In the work, Gioia sought to bring poetry back to the larger American culture instead of it being only important to the elite circle of intellectuals at America's universities. Gioia seeks to connect tradition with the present and to bring back the elements of rhyme, meter, and narrative in contemporary poetry. Gioia's literary influences include Wallace Stevens, W.H. Auden, and T.S. Eliot.

Dana Gioia's work can be described as being a part of a movement in American poetry called New Formalism. New Formalism can be described as a movement that seeks to bring back rhyme, meter, and narrative in contemporary poetry. These New Formalist poets also borrow elements from popular culture in terms of style and subject matter. Gioia describes their work as

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being "less self consciously intellectual and academic than other poets, but also trying to regain a variety of techniques which have been forgotten and a public voice which has been lost."

The Gods of Winter, published in 1991, was written in memory of Gioia's son who died at an early age. This event transformed Gioia's life and the way in which he wrote poetry. In an interview, Gioia says that after his son's death, "writing took on a spiritual urgency I had never experienced before" and describes his writing as being "sustained and emphatic" as a result. In addition, Gioia explains how this personal tragedy transformed his poetry because he no longer cared about what critics or readers thought of his work. Instead, Gioia claims that he wrote for himself and, as a result, his writing became more vulnerable. The theme of death and the gravity of meditating on death permeate much of the poetry in this book.

Nature also plays a prominent theme in this book. Many poems are filled with beautifully detailed descriptions of nature and its intrinsic value. Gioia's poetry shows the reader the importance of live. Gioia illustrates both cherished moments as well as moments of struggle in *The Gods of Winter*. He draws from a lot of personal experiences in his work including the death of his son, his wife's surgery, a foster child growing up to commit murder, the loss of culture in contemporary America, and nature.

Gioia writes using contemporary language and his poetry is easily accessible to the general reader. Gioia intended his work to read this way because of his commitment to bring poetry out of the universities and back to popular culture in contemporary society. He believes in the value of poetry and its ability to be aesthetically pleasing to the general reader.

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One of my favorite poems in this collection is *All Souls*. The poem asks the reader to "suppose there is no heaven and no hell, and that the dead can never leave the earth." In this poem, Gioia chronicles the journey of a soul after death around the earth and its inability to have any kind of sensory experience with the world. The poem ends with these lines, "But they are silent as a rising mist, a smudge of smoke dissolving in the air. They watch the shadows lengthen on the grass. The pallor of the rose is their despair." It seems that Gioia is showing the reader that part of life that we regularly take for granted.

Another touching poem in the collection is *The Song.* In this poem, Gioia seems to contemplate the brief moments of joy he shared with his son before he passed away. The poem begins by asking: "How shall I hold my soul that does not touch yours? How shall I lift it over you to other things?" In the poem, the reader can almost feel Gioia's pain as he worked through the grieving process in the poem. It closes with the line, "And to what player did we sing our interrupted song?"

In *Planting a Sequoia*, the reader experiences Gioia's meditations on nature and commitment to the environment as well as his haunting memory of grieving for his son. One of my favorite lines in this poem is: "But today we kneel in the cold planting you, our native giant...wrapping in your roots a lock of hair, a piece of an infant's birth cord, all that remains above earth of the first-born son." This poem hauntingly shows Gioia's concern with what matters most in life. This tree which will outlive all unborn members of his family will serve as a reminder of both the beauty and sorrow of life.

The Silence of the Poets illustrates how poetry has been lost in contemporary culture. Gioia writes: "What was lost? No one now

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can judge. But we still have music, art, and film, diversions enough for a busy people." This poem reads like a manifesto for the New Formalists. For Gioia, poetry has been neglected and has been delegated to the dark recesses of the university library and the coffee house in the student union. The poem ends with the line: "And a few old men may visit from time to time to run their hands across the spines and reminisce, but no one ever comes to read or would know how."

Gioia invites the readers to reclaim the literary traditions of poetry by illustrating its richness of language and the power it has to speak to our hearts and cut through to the very core of our being. Through his use of simple language to be imaginative and descriptive in his work, Gioia shows us the innate value of life in a world that is beautiful and yet, can still be tragic. If Gioia's goal was to bring poetry back into the public sphere, he certainly accomplished that goal in *The Gods of Winter*. Readers don't have to be schooled in the arcane nuances of poetry in order to enjoy this book, and according to Gioia, readers shouldn't have to.

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