

“CAN POETRY MATTER?”
-- 15 Years After
Essay by Brian Campbell

In 1991, poet and business executive Dana Gioia published an essay in *The Atlantic Monthly* called “Can Poetry Matter?” While it may seem to readers today a self-evident summary of a well-established state of affairs, it caused a storm of controversy (tempest in teapot? saké cup?) in the North American poetry world when it first appeared. Its opening, oft-quoted paragraph reads as follows:

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. Little of the frenetic activity it generates ever reaches outside that closed group. As a class poets are not without cultural status. Like priests in a town of agnostics, they still command a certain residual prestige. But as individual artists they are almost invisible.

Gioia goes on to describe what he aptly calls a “Zen riddle of cultural sociology”, wherein poetry publishing and programs proliferate on a historically unprecedented scale, while the art itself remains a “distressingly confined phenomenon” that has all but disappeared from public view – much of it, as always, of highly questionable worth, appreciated, if at all, by only a tiny coterie of other poets. Here he writes very much along the lines of Joseph Epstein’s mordant “Who Killed Poetry?”, a polemic he references and which I remember both impressed and very much depressed me when it came out three years previously in *Commentary*. In it, Epstein argues that poetry is “flourishing in a vacuum”, that an overwhelming production of essentially insipid work is being artificially stimulated by the grants and MFA system, which has helped to choke off poetry appreciation in the culture.

Looking up the Epstein piece on the net for further parallels (it was not readily available), I came across this 1989 article by Donald Hall, “Death to the Death of Poetry”, one of a spate of about thirty articles written around that time intended to refute it. I daresay that I loved it. It convincingly nays the naysayers of contemporary poetry (excuse my neighing!), and gives a bang-on diagnosis of much of the so-called “problem” of poetry appreciation in our culture. Vis-a-vis an oft-lamented decline in quality of contemporary verse-writing, Hall describes how, because readers in general and particularly the media are slow to catch on to a poet’s significance (as compared to say a novelist’s), a paradox ensues that we could call “The Giant/Pigmy Syndrome”:

Time, which reported *The Waste Land* as a hoax in 1922, canonized T. S. Eliot in a 1950 cover story. Certainly *Time's* writers and editors altered over thirty years, but they also stayed the same: always the Giants grow old and die, leaving the Pygmies behind. After the age of Eliot, Frost, Stevens, Moore, and Williams, the wee survivors were Lowell, Berryman, Jarrell, and Bishop. When the survivors died, younger elegiac journalists revealed that the dead Pygmies had been Giants all along--and *now* the young poets were dwarfs. Doubtless obituaries lauding Allen Ginsberg are already written; does anyone remember *Life* on the Beat Generation, thirty years ago?

Hall argues with considerable force that there *is* a definite and growing audience for poetry, evidenced in the numbers of readings and sales of poetry books, that latter of which, at the time of the writing of his essay, had gone up at least tenfold over the previous thirty years. A dozen or more American poets, he reports, had recently sold books by the tens of thousands: Adrienne Rich, Robert Bly, Allen Ginsberg, John Ashbery, Galway Kinnell, Robert Creeley, Gary Snyder, Denise Levertov, Carolyn Forché, and certainly others. Galway Kinnell approached fifty thousand with *Book of Nightmares*, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *Coney Island of the Mind*, a trade paperback, sold more than a million copies. These sales figures, as always with poetry, are cumulative over years; this means of course that they consistently fall under the radar of best seller and yearly book sale lists.

The problem, Hall is ready to acknowledge, is one of cultural perception: Although there is more poetry today than ever, there is less poetry reviewing in national journals. Examples are plenty, and he mentions some of them: *Harper's* magazine and *The Atlantic* had recently abandoned quarterly surveys of poetry, *New York Times Book Review* had diminished its attention, etc. Aside from any deliberate editorial policy on the part of these journals, one reason he pinpoints is purely socio-economic:

In the past, men and women like Conrad Aiken, Malcolm Cowley, and Louise Bogan practiced literary journalism to make a living. Their successors now meet classes MWF. People with tenure don't need to write book reviews.

(Tenure? It seems permanently provisional contracts are enough.) This dearth of course leaves poetry – and poetry readers – greatly disadvantaged:

... we need a cadre of reviewers to sift through the great volume of material. The weight of numbers discourages readers from trying to keep up. More poetry than ever: How do we discriminate? How do we find or identify beautiful new work? When there are sufficient reviewers, who occupy continual soap-boxes and promote

developing standards, they provide sensors to report from the confusing plentitude of the field.

Gioia's "Can Poetry Matter?" was written at least partially to gainsay boosters like Hall. One of Gioia's rhetorical devices is to lump Hall in with the thirty other nameless writers who felt moved to rebut Epstein's polemic; only one, Henry Taylor, who went to the seemingly desperate length of writing two rebuttals, is named. It is beyond the scope of this article to deal point by point with Gioia's "Can Poetry Matter." To my view it is excellently written, most of its observations are quite astute, and the six recommendations that conclude the article would most certainly enhance the practice and presentation of poetry if put consistently into effect (one recommendation I've already taken to heart is to share, where time permits, at least one poem by another poet when I do readings). Don Hall's feisty essay, however, injects a positive note that makes necessary reading for anyone with vital interest in the issue. Personally, I wish I had read it back in '89 when it appeared.

Looking over these articles, I wondered, has anyone convincingly raised the cudgels since? Or could these essays, dating from more than 15 years ago, be considered "the last words" in that debate? In many ways of course things remain very much the same in the poetry world: many of the same institutions dominate, as do the same writing programs and journals; MFA poets keep being churned out by the thousands, prizes have proliferated to the point where it almost seems a distinction *not* to have won one, and contemporary poetry continues to be all but ignored by major media. But it would be hard to believe that no one has made commentary on some major ground shifts, especially considering the onset of the internet and the continued popularity of spoken word. To satisfy my own curiosity I decided to simply type "Can Poetry Matter" into Google and see what came up. Sure enough, my search yielded about a dozen articles, of which at least three or four were well worth reading in their entirety.

In "Does Poetry Matter: The Culture of Poetry", originally a talk given at a 1997 Raven Chronicles poetry forum, poet Bart Baxter starts off in an amusing fashion:

Before I begin my prepared remarks, let me ask for a show of hands in the audience, a scrupulously honest show of hands. How many of you here tonight are poets? [Half the audience raised hands.] How many of you would like to be a poet, have maybe written some verse, are looking for a publisher? [1/4 raised hands.] And how many here are friends of the moderator or someone on the panel? [1/4 raised hands.] Now, everyone in the audience who did not fall into any one of those three categories, who did not raise your hands before, please raise your hands now. [One hand was raised.]

I think if Dana Gioia were here tonight, he would simply say:
I rest my case.

In this short article, Baxter gives a good synopsis of Gioia's main points in "Can Poetry Matter?", and describes also how Gioia's opinion has since changed since writing that article:

Dana Gioia wrote "Can Poetry Matter?" long before he realized what was going on in the urban centers across the country, in the night clubs and cabarets, at the Greenmill Tavern in Chicago and the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York, at the open readings and poetry slams. In a lecture he presented at Poets House in New York on October 26 [1995], which became an essay published in Poetry Flash, "Notes Toward a New Bohemia," his greatest fears about the future of poetry seem to be assuaged.

Everyone likes to sound authoritative in his opinions, but it's getting harder and harder these days to say anything authoritative about *anything*. We have to give Gioia an E (Excellent) for Effort in trying his best to update his perceptions. In "Notes Toward a New Bohemia", Gioia concludes along these lines (quoting again from the Baxter article):

1. The primary means of publication of new poetry is now oral. This applies to older established poets as well as new unknowns.
2. This represents an enormous paradigm shift away from print culture, in that:
 - a. The government is neither involved with subsidizing events nor appointing particular poets.
 - b. The physical audience listening to poetry greatly outnumbers the people who read poetry in books. (Do we need one more professor to tell us that the important thing is whether the poem will translate from the "stage to the page"?).
3. This is a populist revolution, a distinct move from print to oral tradition, largely among groups long alien to the traditional, dominant, literary, academic culture:
 - a. e.g., rap lyrics, in music and poetry.
 - b. Cowboy poetry.
 - c. Poetry slams.

4. Surprisingly, most of this new populist poetry is formal:
 - a. e.g., the four-stress lines in rap.
 - b. The English ballad form in cowboy poetry.
 - c. The merger of poetry and experimental theater in performance poetry at poetry slams often uses elaborate rhyme schemes.

5. As for the University, an institution better equipped to preserve old culture than foster the creation of new art, it will probably hold on dearly to Modernism, and will continue to do so until Post-modern poetry's last gasp.

Poor Modernism! (As for myself, a writer for whom Post Modernism mostly occurs when he sends his work in the mail, I'm already beginning to lose my breath...)

John Palattella's "10 Years After, Poetry Still Matters", published in 2002 in *The Higher Education Chronicle*, aims to take Gioia to task for a certain smugness and presumptuous excess. What he does manage to do is make himself gratingly annoying with some rather poorly aimed pot-shots at a man who has managed, with arguable success, to marry mammon and the muse. Although bios I have accessed on Palattella list him only as a "writer on poetry" for *The Nation*, *London Review of Books* and a number of other august publications, I can't help but imagine him firmly ensconced in Higher Education himself, what with his thinly-veiled condescension towards the mere "executive who ... once managed the Jell-O account at General Foods", who had the audacity to shake up the poetry world by publishing a book of essays on contemporary poetry. Aside from suggesting that Gioia's argument in "Can Poetry Matter?" is couched primarily in unsubstantiated assertions and "bombastic" analogies, the most disingenuous aspect of Palattella's review is that he doesn't clearly acknowledge that Gioia, whatever the limitations of his purview, went to considerable lengths in later writings to show how the growth of spoken word has changed the character of the poetry scene since the publication of his landmark essay. Palattella does, however, make some interesting points along the way. I like this one:

In 1991, the year Gioia's argument appeared in *The Atlantic*, nearly 5,000 poets were listed in A Directory of American Poets and Fiction Writers. According to the *Directory of American Poetry Books*, which is maintained by Poets House, in New York City, nearly 7,000 volumes of poetry were published in the United States from 1990 to 2001. (That figure excludes poetry CD's, audiotapes and videotapes, and other multimedia recordings of poetry.)

The situation in the mid-20th century, which Gioia treats as a golden age of poetry-writing and poetry-reviewing, was considerably different. According to a bibliography published in

the magazine *Accent*, there were 151 American poets in 1941; from 1931 to 1940, they published a total of 264 books of poetry (excluding doggerel and inspirational verse).

Commenting on those *Accent* figures in 1989, in an essay later collected in *Outside Stories, 1987-1991*, the essayist and translator Eliot Weinberger offered an explanation that remains sound today: 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."

...Not all of the wires have remained down, since the Internet has not only facilitated communication among cantons but also opened up territory for new cantons. But the poetry world is still a federation, not a republic, and whether its decentralization has fostered pluralism or balkanization remains an open question.

How about pluralistic balkanization – is that a possibility? Reading that last sentence, my own tongue feels balkanized. But I love the Weinburger quote. Palattella's concluding remarks, despite my differences with him, mirror my own evolving view of the contemporary poetry world I as explore its permutations:

What's certain is that, given the changes in the country's demographics, the rise of mass university education, and the growth of poetry as a middle-class profession, that little mid-century village has vanished for good. Perhaps the term that best sums up the current state of affairs is motley -- a mix of dazzling, foolish, and banal work that cuts across styles, movements, and schools. The murky certainties of the title essay of "*Can Poetry Matter?*" have grown only murkier in 10 years' time, which is why wandering around a motley poetry world remains more appealing to me than the solicitude of Dana Gioia.

Jake Berry in "[Responding to Dana Gioia's 'Can Poetry Matter?'](#)" (*Muse Apprentice Guild*, Oct. 2002), is one of a number of writers who complain that the whole debate is *tedious as hell, bores them to tears, let's just go on writing the best we can, come what may*. His essay begins thus:

My initial response to the question, before I read the essay — to think, "Can Poetry Matter?" was "I hope not!" Why would I respond in this way? I am a poet and should have much at risk, I should want to see poetry matter as much as possible. The

problem lies in what matters culturally and who decides what matters. Despite the fact that more books are sold now than ever before, that more books are purchased and presumably read, we seem somehow less erudite, less intellectual than we were even thirty years ago. And the cultural artifacts, the phenomena that matter, even to the intelligentsia, often seem so insignificant when compared to art, past or present, that in order to matter one would have to sacrifice the very art one hoped to foster in the first place. So is it better to be irrelevant than relevant in a vapid culture? Am I cynical? Of course I am. What was once known as pop culture seems now almost universally accepted as the only culture.

etc. Actually, Jake Berry's attitude to pop culture turns out to be far more open and nuanced than this opening paragraph would suggest; and although he claims a profound indifference to the matter of "mattering", his concern about poetry's social role reveals itself to be at least as abiding and intense as Gioia's. His though is the perspective of a profoundly alienated outsider, from the capitalist economy (in this respect he does not resemble Gioia) and more particularly, from academia (in this, he very much does). Employing terms borrowed from Frank Lazer's two-volume *Opposing Poetries*, Berry sees academe, dominated by "plainverse" writing school poetry, absorbing the opposing "language poetry movement", much in the way that free market capitalism devoured the burgeoning '60's "revolution" in the name of style and fashion and sold the trappings -- clothes, haircuts, symbology -- in slightly refined form to the culture at large. The result he describes as a "great homogenization." I am not at all convinced of this -- in 2006, this seems a blinkered perspective -- but doesn't the following scenario have an all-too-familiar ring?

One can practice the accepted forms or resign oneself to obscurity, and many, most, of the poets outside the academy have done exactly that. They pass poems to one another and publish in the handful of publications that accept outsiders. Primarily they work and either self-publish or publish one another in small inexpensive editions that the general public would not even recognize as a book. Most of the poetry I read that might "matter" has almost no exposure at all to an audience beyond a few interconnected renegade cabals in what remains of the literary underground.

Close to the end of the essay, Berry asks a series of questions that I'm sure all practicing poets have asked at one time or another:

Should we as poets be prepared to accept, even embrace, obscurity in order to practice an art that is important to the deeper, more complex, conditions of our species? For what reason? Does reason have anything to do with it? Do we not practice this art out of some obsession that forever seems to remain just beyond our ability to describe and name? Or do we practice it to keep the poetic faculties alive regardless of who or how many may subscribe to that experience? It is certain that our culture contains a great many people that are broadly intelligent enough to appreciate and generate poetry that is populist in its scope, and to recognize and call it an art. Do they constitute an "educated public"? Probably not, for the most part, in the sense that Gioia means it. Does that kind of public still exist? Yes, but most likely in a diminished percentage.

We do as we must, simple as that. Reconsidering these various points of view, I've come to conclude that from the point of view of creation, publication, even audience for live readings, poetry is doing really quite fine, considering how non-commercial and non-marketable an art form it inherently is. (As [Simon DeDeo](#), one of my blog interlocutors, put it so well, does theoretical science matter to anyone? Not really, except for the practitioners, the aficionados, and the students. Similarly for poetry. As theoretical science is not in a bad way, neither is poetry.) With the internet, a vast spectrum of diversity is literally at our fingertips. Through blogs, poetry boards and other internet publications, spontaneous communities of poets, information sharing and literary discussion are constantly evolving. Poet-bloggers such as myself have acquired a greater sense of interconnectedness and possibility than ever before; our site meters, however inflated they may be by irrelevant visits, tell us we reach a world-wide audience of hundreds, if not thousands. Through other blogs and internet reviews I have encountered fabulous poetry by such up-and-coming writers as Ilya Kaminsky, GC Waldrep, Victoria Chang, and Eduardo Corral, all of it fresh, none of it clubby or derivative.

What interests me in particular is the emergence of publishing venues that are not under the auspices of academe, that are also not caught up in their own tiresome version of "being cool" (*Shampoo* and *Exquisite Corpse* come quickly to mind), but that in an independent, understated way highlight, on a consistent basis, excellent work. These include the net magazines *Octopus*, *Dusie*, *Nth Position*, *Three Candles Review*, *No Tell Motel*, and *can we get out ball back?*, to name a few. Among high-circulation print reviews that reach a broad public and yet are open to poetry on their pages, fresh arrivals include the Canadian *Adbusters* and *Maisonneuve* (also irksome in their efforts at "cool", but I like their sizeable and sophisticated audience). Weird top-down initiatives that are certain to bring seismic shifts in the poetry landscape include the [Griffin Prize](#) here in Canada (of prizes, as has been noted, there's a plethora, but this one is the biggest yet for

a single book of poetry) and the recent Ruth Lilly donation of \$175 million to Poetry Magazine. To read more about upcoming initiatives related to the latter, [see here](#).

All that is really lacking in this present Poetry Age, as both Hall and Gioia go to lengths to point out, are prominent critics in prominent places to perform that crucial function of finding the diamonds among the mounds of broken glass, and of pointing out with passion and critical intelligence, the differences. As far back as 1978 Robert Bly published an essay called, "Where Have All the Critics Gone?" (later published in his book of essays, *American Poetry: Wildness and Domesticity*). There he pretty well outlined the malaise: widespread critical nepotism, vapid praise, etc. Unless I'm blind as I describe the elephant, the situation hasn't substantially changed.* I won't make the space here to go into the nuances of Bly's essay, but its final gruff lines are

In our situation we need poets and writers who are willing to do the hard work around literature, that is, to separate the weak from the strong, photography from art. In brief, we need people with joy in their own intellect and judgment.

Echoed 13 years later by Gioia with, "By abandoning the hard work of evaluation, the poetry subculture demeans its own art."

Think though: with a few shifts in the cultural climate, we could have what Latin Americans have enjoyed for decades in the Mexican *Excelsior* or the Nicaraguan *La Prensa Literaria*, a whole section of a widely circulating newspaper dedicated not just to reviews but excerpts of fiction and poetry by established as well as emerging writers. Wouldn't that be something! (Now I hear a loud chorus of, "Dream on!")

To borrow a page from pop culture, before the media spotlight turned on to the likes of Kenneth Flatley's River Dance, Nathalie McMaster and Ashley MacIsaac, Celtic dancers and violinists played in kitchens and the occasional festival -- and they probably will go back to that again (if they haven't already). Poetry is in such a kitchen state. (Actually, perhaps more appropriate would be Hart Crane's line: "...in this town, poetry's a bedroom occupation.") In the present circumstances, my suggestion, for what it's worth, to fellow poets is: plug away, hone your craft, flood the mails, keep publishing. And if you can, find a lover who enjoys your work. Who knows what'll become of it; in the present poetry climate, it may yet go no farther than that.

* voices like Joan Houlihan, Ron Silliman and Canada's Carmine Starnino -- do they have the wide sweep and depth of a Wilson, Bloom or Sontag? Are they and others like them enough to make that substantial difference? Rather doubt it, as yet...

Other links of interest:

Marc Pietrzykowski writes a critique of privatization and manages to relate that to the sociology of poetry and the Gioia essay. Densely written (this poet writes like an economist, if not economically), this is nevertheless a cogent read and includes a few wildfire suggestions on how to loosen the stifling grip of the communication monopolies that be. Among them: send your poetry to mainstream magazines, newspapers, etc. Of course your work will be rejected out of hand, but maybe, just maybe, you'll jog those iron-clad assumptions a touch!

Simon De Deo and I discuss the merits of Gioia's poetry here on my blog.
<http://briancampbell.blogspot.ca/2006/03/can-poetry-matter-debate-part-3-12-of.html>

Joan Houlihan weighs in with a survey of graduates of MFA programs, and confirms my own hunch that my money has been far better spent on wine and books (not to mention song, etc.)
<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5914>

Finally, a 1995 interview with Dana Gioia, where he counters some of the criticism levied against "Can Poetry Matter?" This too is a very engaging read.
<http://gloria-brame.com/glory/gioia.htm>

* This article was adapted from a four-part post called "*The 'Can Poetry Matter?' Debate*" that first appeared in *Out of the Woodwork*, Feb. 25 - Mar. 6, 2006.

I can't understand these chaps who go round American universities explaining how they write poems: It's like going round explaining how you sleep with your wife.
- *Philip Larkin*