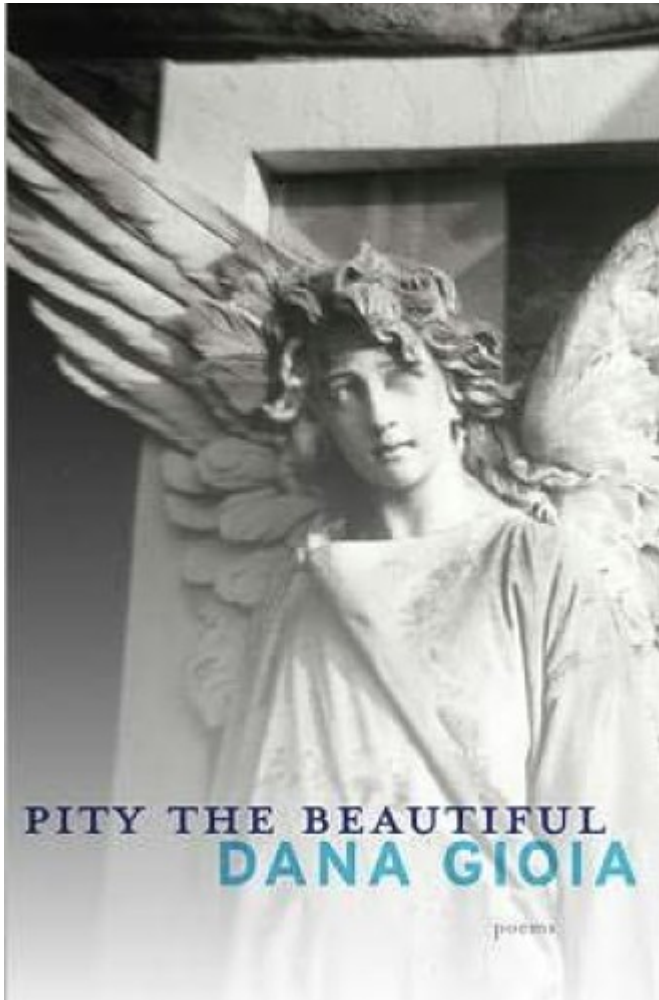


Pity the Beautiful, by Dana Gioia

reviewed by [Jeffrey Johnson](#) in the [February 6, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Pity the Beautiful

By Dana Gioia
Graywolf Press

Poet and critic Dana Gioia, former chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, signals his ambitious artistic tendencies and his firm spiritual commitments from the first poem of this new collection. A versatile poet, he works through traditional,

inherited forms as well as through the free verse characteristic of the work of many of his contemporaries. A devout Catholic, he maintains a Catholic perspective of humility within a larger community and an appreciation of metaphysical mystery beyond surface impressions. A sacramental poet, he finds art in selected objects and in the heartbreaks that regularly come upon human beings.

In the first poem, “The Present,” rhymed according to a medieval Italian convention, an unopened gift lies on a bedside table. The reader perceives the beautifully wrapped present as an object of affection or at least of human connection. Whatever reserve keeps the present unopened—it could be sadness, regret, grief, bitterness or something else—the situation shows a restraint not unlike that experienced in the ritual patterns of worship. The careful packaging, like movement and order in liturgy, is appreciated and valued even though the content within is the essential object of delight and speculation. We pay a dear price when we abandon the forms of liturgy and poetry that wrap gifts of grace.

Just as Gioia works hard to breathe new life into old forms of poetry, he calls Catholic writers to work through the faith and life of the church to revive its music, art, architecture and liturgy and to enrich the greater culture, in the lineage of Dante, Michelangelo, El Greco, Graham Greene and Flannery O’Connor. In a 2011 address at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., Gioia called Catholic artists and writers to

leave the homogenous, characterless suburbs of the imagination and move back to the “big city,” where we can renovate those remarkable districts of the imagination which have such grace and personality, such strength and tradition. . . . It is time to renovate and reoccupy our own tradition.

In addition to his high regard for traditional forms of poetry, Gioia brings influences of music—notably jazz and opera—into his poems. The fourth section of the collection, titled “Words for Music,” includes the book’s title poem, “Pity the Beautiful,” a light verse in a melancholy key that sounds like it should be sung in a bar at closing time.

In a 2006 interview, Gioia said that he refuses to renounce or downplay his Catholicism: “I refuse to join the ranks of ex-Catholics, who so slavishly follow intellectual fashion as a part of upward mobility. My sympathies are with the poor and the faithful—the people who raised me.” Part of that Catholicism, of course, is

corporate attention paid to others and to the world through the disciplines of prayer and meditation. These poems include a beatitude at the winter solstice, an argument for autumn processions and even a ghost story. Gioia lays blessings, symbols and animated spirits before readers who might be jangled by smart phones and jaded by nihilistic television dramas. He offers them a sure and fine artistic voice in which enjoyment and intellectual content, history and emotion can coexist in the same work of art.

The final poem of the collection is an uncharacteristically biographical creation, "Majority." The title refers to the age of majority, when a citizen assumes the responsibilities and freedoms of an adult and the parents' legal custody ends. "Majority" is a quiet and lovely goodbye to one of Gioia's three children, a boy who died in infancy. In it Gioia recounts the passing years of childhood and adolescence as he imagines his son in the "joyful proxies" of other children. He writes of the year when his son would have turned 21, the age of majority: "Finally, it makes sense / that you have moved away / into your own afterlife."