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Naming and Taming the Truth:
Dana Gioia's Transformative Poetry

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Abstract

This essay attempts to trace the ways in which Dana Gioia's use of form relates to, and simultaneously differs from Romanticism, Modernism and postmodernism. His particular brand of formalism takes up the notion of a connection between truth and beauty, without presuming to identify one with the other, and, at the same time, resisting both the Modernist obsession with dissolution and fragmentariness and postmodernism's skepticism towards grand narratives. Form becomes a coalescing agent, uniting different aspects and levels of reality, and narratives are instrumental in shaping both the individual and the social body. The power to name (point to and describe) and to tame (to translate dark or incomprehensible aspects of reality), inherent in language, is the means by which poetry shapes our social and cultural world.

Keywords: modernism, new formalism, expansive poetry, poetic truth, poetic form

Introduction: Not Form but Transformation

Our private and public lives are shaped by the truths we fight for, and we are constantly at war with those that misunderstand us. Knowledge is power, yet true knowledge is scarce and not easily discernible among the heaps of disposable errors. Science has developed procedures and protocols to ascertain the truth of facts, and logic has its own methods to check the truth of statements. Yet while scientific, logical truth is always

predicated of a specific object, there is another kind of truth (sometimes capitalized as the Truth), which we find in religion, metaphysics, or esoteric knowledge – modes that emphasize the meaning of life – and we identify with. These two forms of truth – the universal truth of propositions, sentences, axioms, facts – and the fuzzier, individual Truth share a certain kind of efficiency: they are foundational values which enable us to proceed further.

For John Keats, the visionary moment that crowned his contemplation of the Grecian urn revealed that “Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty,” a conclusion that a Modernist like T.S. Eliot found meaningless – and a “serious blemish on a beautiful poem” (270) – strange perhaps, if we think of the Modernist *topos* of epiphany, of those myriad aesthetic revelations experience afforded writers like James Joyce, W.B. Yeats, Katherine Mansfield and Eliot himself. Yet Eliot’s criticism of the final lines of Keats’ poem is not ungrounded: beauty is often in the eye of the beholder, while truth and subjectivity are sworn enemies. Eliot remarked that either he had failed to understand Keats’ meaning or the statement that “beauty is truth, truth beauty” was simply “untrue” (“Dante” 270). His observation was not, as we might be tempted to understand, some kind of gentle irony directed both at himself and Keats. This modern – and modernist – failure to understand sprang from the gap that separates the Romantic aspiration towards a unity of the metaphysical and the natural from the subject/object divide that plagues the modern soul. Keats’ beauty was a sort of “true beauty,” an ideal that served to erase distinctions between higher values; for Eliot, any idea of beauty was inherently subjective and particular, whereas truth remained an aspiration towards the universal.

I have begun my analysis of Dana Gioia’s “poetic revelations” with this comparison between the Romantic and Modernist artistic credo because Gioia’s aesthetic positioning is the result of a dialectical movement from Romanticism to Modernism and then to the new direction in American poetry (variously called New Formalism,ⁱ or Expansive Poetry) that he helped to define.ⁱⁱ In the *Colosseum Critical Introduction to Dana Gioia*, Matthew Brennan contends that the key to understanding Gioia’s aesthetics lies in his allegiance to New Formalism, which he goes

on to define as “less an organized movement than a generational change in poetic sensibility,” drawing together “poets dissatisfied with the entrenched tradition of the first-person lyric in free verse” (15). Gioia's article “Notes on the New Formalism” was instrumental in helping the new movement coalesce and gave it a definite orientation towards experimenting with traditional forms. To see how this apparently paradoxical injunction worked for Gioia, it is necessary to go back to the idea of Romantic and Modernist poetry.

For most Romantics poetry, the highest exercise of the imagination, rested on the unity of the material and the spiritual, the subject and the object, beauty and truth inseparable from each other. For Modernists like Eliot and Yeats, however, “the center cannot hold” (“The Second Coming” 187): subjected to the centrifugal forces of modernity, poetry becomes as fragmentary and unstable as modern life. For those who still retain a religious feeling like Eliot, truth is hidden or unspeakable, not a direct object of poetry, but that ‘absent’ God that so terrifies Prufrock (the rock of scientific proof, not the rock of faith upon which Jesus had built his church), an impossible desire. The search for truth is replaced by the search for new gods, new modes of expression, new “objective correlatives” (“Hamlet” 145) which can truthfully render the process of a dying order, of a world on the brink of extinction.

This desperate need for creation, for new and original modes of expression was perhaps unparalleled in the history of poetry, and it led to formal innovation as well as formal dissolution. Traditional poetic technique, meter and rhyme were discarded in favor of free verse. Since this choice rested on more than a desire for artistic reform, being predicated on a revolutionary poetic spirit, it gave rise to what Octavio Paz called the “tradition of rupture” (73). The followers of modernism turned formal experimentation and innovation into a mandatory requirement of poetry – which arguably led to a fossilization of free verse. Thus, while the formal discontinuities of Modernist poetry mirrored an age of rupture, turmoil and dissolution, the requirement of constant innovation appeared ridiculous and unproductive to a number of contemporary American poets. Among them, Gioia is an outspoken critic of the negative consequences that such a demand spelled for poetry, in

particular its imprisonment in academic circles and creative workshops and its marginalization in the wider framework of contemporary culture.

The legacy of modernism – “the free verse orthodoxy of an older generation of Modernists like Ezra Pound and Williams Carlos Williams,” as Robert McPhillips calls it (33) – came under harsh scrutiny in Gioia’s influential essay “Can Poetry Matter?,” and was criticized for having transformed poetry from a popular oral art into an elitist written form, responsible for the current marginal status of poetry. The focus on formal innovation, which had done away with rhyme and meter, structures that attested to the orality of poetry and made it a kind of concise art for the relaying of experience, had also turned poetry into an exercise reserved only to the few. Gioia, together with a generation of poets who later came to be subsumed under New Formalism, sought to change this by a counter-revolution which was mistakenly perceived, by some American critics and poets, as a restoration, a conservative return to traditional poetic techniques. After the initial enthusiastic reception of poetry books written by New Formalist poets, there was, according to McPhillips, “a critical backlash among many free-verse advocates” (3). The outrage at this revival of poetic form was stronger as the free verse had been perceived as the hallmark of American democracy. One reason why new formalist poetry met with such – disproportionately – sharp criticism in an age when everybody can write what and how they desire may be the fact, duly noted by Gioia, that “[t]he new formalists put free verse poets in the ironic and unprepared position of being the *status quo*” (“Notes” 15).

Political considerations apart, if one were to judge objectively, there was as much conservatism in the Modernist poetic revolution as there is a revolutionary spirit in the New Formalist/Expansivist return to traditional forms. Modernist literature mirrored its age of technical inventions quite faithfully in its preoccupation with doing away with old forms and inventing new ones.ⁱⁱⁱ It was less inventive, however, in the mode and modality through which it related to reality, as its technical innovations were still tied to a mimetic conception of art, where the fragmentariness of form was supposed to be an “objective correlative” for the gaps and discontinuities of a worldview shaped by secularization, technologization and two world wars. On the contrary, the revitalization of contemporary

poetry that McPhillips identified as the main objective of New Formalism is envisaged not only as a return to traditional forms but also as a means of its achieving transformative power.

The impulse that lies at the heart of Gioia's poetry, in spite of its exquisite imagery (or artfully disguised underneath it), is not representational and mimetic, but imaginative and transformative. Poetry goes beyond expression and representation, acquiring a sort of power which acts on the individual psyche and transforms it. Rhyme, meter and orality become essential for this type of poetry, because these are the features that enable it to have an effect, to move the audience. Since it is transformation and not representation that constitutes poetic desire, truth as the liminal space that creates the conditions for transformation becomes part of its aesthetic: here we can speak, once again, of a beauty that partakes of truth and of a truth that shines forth through beauty. Gioia's truth and beauty are far from the Romantic imagination; yet the fact that they work together shows how strange the ways of poetry are. In what follows I will show what kind of truth becomes necessary for poetry to achieve transformative power and how, in Gioia's poetry, beauty becomes the only way of accessing a higher truth.

The Necessary Truth

Gioia's first poem in his first published collection, *Daily Horoscope* (1986), is entitled "The Burning Ladder." It is a modern parable that draws on the dialectic of gravity (*gravitas*, the earthly, embodied quality) and desire to show the insurmountable difficulties of surpassing our own frail human nature to reach for God. In the poem "Jacob / never climbed the ladder / burning in his dream," while "Sleep / pressed him like a stone / in the dust" (3), preventing him from seeing the angels descending and ascending towards God. Sleep and dust, two metaphors of death, point to the human limitations that endanger our path to perfection, conceived, in the Biblical story of Jacob's ladder, as a gradual ascension. Sleeping through it all, "a stone / upon a stone pillar," Jacob is denied the vision of the angels' "slowly disappearing / into the scattered light / between the stars," but not the capacity for sensing the sacred, as he is shivering in his

dream – an allusion perhaps to one of Gioia’s favorite figures of Christianity, the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard.^{iv} Although the overt message of the poem is pessimistic – our human limitations prevent us from reaching God, the visual form of the poem (written in the shape of a five-rung ladder^v), as well as the enjambment of most lines, which gives an impression of continuity and coherence, resist this first interpretation: the ladder-shaped poem stays there, as a reminder that perfectibility takes time and requires second chances.

In “Sunday Night in Santa Rosa,” the last poem in the collection, the post-carnival scenery contrasts both with the upside-down world of the carnival and with the ordinary life which is being resumed. Although Gioia’s imagery is profoundly resonant with the carnivalesque, we are as far here from Mikhail Bakhtin (61-63) as possible. The carnival is revealed to be a world of props, appearances and false promises, a pageant of shining illusions, which collapses as soon as the spectacle is finished. Nature (the wind and the mice) takes over, revealing the misery beneath this made-up world. Gioia’s carnival is devoid of any subversive artistic potential; it is the final gesture of the clown who “peels / away his face” (87) in front of a mirror which restores dignity to the human species, and not the freedom that the carnival is supposed to foster by the temporary suspension of all social hierarchies and rules, according to Bakhtin. The “peeling away” of the clown’s face, the removal of the mask, carries a double symbolic load and works on two levels: first, as this is the staple gesture of the actors at the end of the play, it signals that the spectacle is over and refers back, like in a circle, to the first line of the poem: “The carnival is over”; secondly, as this unmasking takes place in front of a mirror, the contrast between illusion and reality becomes reflected in one’s self. Truth and illusion are thus internalized at the very core of identity. While other characters in the poem are defined by their masks (the Dog-Faced Boy that sneaks off to join the Serpent Lady for the night, the Dead Man who loads his coffin on a truck) and thus become inseparable from the roles they perform, the anonymous clown who stares in his dressing mirror and peels away his face stands for the emergence of self-reflection, awareness and consciousness. The gesture of unmasking represents the moment of truth, and, for Gioia, truth is the precondition for developing

self-reflection and consciousness.

The ladder and the mirror point to different ways of accessing the truth. As a symbol of ascension, the ladder shows the way to a higher Truth, a metaphysical or transcendent one, which tired Jacob misses in his dream. The burning ladder in the dream, the impossibility of desire, the gravity that pulls him down towards the earth work as signs for the limitations of human nature, which proves incapable of reaching a higher truth. Yet the tone of the poem is not despairing – as Robert Frost managed to define and settle the conflict between the two opposed pulls in the human being, one towards nature and its freedom and the other towards society with its burden of responsibility in the famous “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” in a similar way Gioia contrasts man’s pull towards the duties and responsibilities of ordinary life with the metaphysical impulse. One might even imagine Gioia’s fictional Jacob as the fictional I of Frost’s poem: the promises he had to keep and the miles he had to travel^{vi} had exhausted and dulled his consciousness to such extent that he did not manage to keep even that small grain of awareness that would have enabled him to climb the burning ladder in his dream.

The mirror, on the other hand, points to a different kind of truth, an insight that cannot be reached by degrees, like in ascension, but at once, by a gesture of unmasking. The mirror in itself is a neutral medium: it can show us either the mask we wear, or the true face we hide from the world. The act of unmasking before the mirror points to a desire for self-reflection in a human being, a desire that shapes consciousness. This is a truth that we are all capable of reaching, but only few have the courage to pursue it. Perhaps Gioia’s attraction to Kierkegaard stems from this conviction, whose root is religious and Christian, that one’s identity can be established only in the light of truth. In “Homage to Kierkegaard,” by mixing quotes and facts from the life of the Danish philosopher, Gioia describes an exemplary life lived in the light of truth: it is a story of suffering and alienation, of an outcast who stands “alone before God in fear and trembling” (24). In a sense, God is the mirror that the clown-philosopher looks into, and the trembling (Jacob’s shivering in “The Burning Ladder”) is the sign of the painful awareness of one’s limitations. A life lived in this awareness contains within it the promise of salvation,

of perfection granted: “Now with God’s help I shall at last become myself” (24). The transformation of the human being which was refused to Jacob and only alluded to in the “peeling away” of the mask is fully granted to Kierkegaard, even if it happens post-mortem: the crippled Soren, whose hair “rose in waves six inches above his head” (23), looks radiant in death, his skin becoming “almost transparent” (24), almost revealing his soul.

The courage one needs in order to effect this transformation is the courage it takes to see the world for what it is: “an uninhabitable place, temporary at best” (“The End” 51). Every day of our life feels like an apocalypse, to which, like the speaker in the poem “The End,” we are dumb witnesses: “like a sleeper shaken from a dream, / I witnessed what I could not understand” (52). No wonder modern man looks for escape from such a harsh reality. In the six poems that make up the “Daily Horoscope” in the eponymous collection, Gioia plays both with the early Christian theme of reading the Book of Nature and the modern search for the miraculous, in a disenchanted world, in various divination practices. The titles of the poems (“Today will be...,” “Nothing is lost...,” “Do not expect...,” “Beware of things in duplicate...,” “The stars now rearrange themselves...,” “News will arrive from far away...”) build up an expectation of mystery, of wonderful things that will come true. Without exception, these expectations will be thwarted: the wonderful rhetoric of the title announces just another ordinary day, or a phone call from a distance that melts space and time into a nostalgic whole.

In “Nothing is lost...,” the principle of material accumulation is ironically converted into the law of spiritual loss, as a coin that circulates and returns to its owner is made to stand for the gradual dwindling of possibilities. “Beware of things in duplicate...” plays with the idea of the evil double, which turns out to lie in a host of ordinary household stuff, harmless at first sight. Yet the listing at the beginning and at the end of the poem starts with ordinary objects like knives, cufflinks, keys, only to end, disturbingly, with “the eyes / of someone sitting next to you” and “your own reflection in the glass” (28). It is in these ordinary things that the mystery lies, but we refuse to see it, just as we refuse to see ourselves as we truly are. Instead of looking at the stars, which “rearrange themselves

above you / but to no effect,” we should look “for smaller signs instead, the fine / disturbances of ordered things”: they will reveal to us “another world ... behind the ordinary” (29), if only we can accept and live with our broken expectations. This is a difficult truth that each of us has to come to terms with, and Gioia teaches us this lesson with so much style and elegance that it is difficult to ignore it. Paradoxically, the experience of mystery does not come from reading and interpreting the Book of Nature – we misuse it by using it as a form of divination – but by confronting it as otherness. Since “nothing is hidden in the obvious / changes of the world,” “the dim / reflection of the sun on tall, dry grass / is more than you will ever understand” (27). Only by pressing “against / the surface of impenetrable things” (27) can one partake of the true mystery of the world. Gioia prefers this negative theology of Nature, since any attempt to understand it is doomed to fail. It is this awareness of the mysterious otherness of Nature that can shield us from the devastating effects of disenchantment, by preserving and revering the mystery inherent in the natural world.

Gioia’s Poetry between Reality (Truth) and Imagination (Form)

The poetic worlds of the Modernists are born of despair. The cultural reconstructions of Ezra Pound, the ghostly visitations in T.S. Eliot, the esoteric visions of Yeats relate and are responses to the sickness of a dying order. Their poetic worlds are havens, more or less safe, more or less comfortable, from the catastrophes of the real world. This large-scale orchestrated escape from the real world, together with the growing power of technology and the new media, gave rise to the postmodernist concept of simulacra, which had supposedly supplanted reality. Human beings no longer had to confront a rapidly shifting reality, as there was no reality to confront: we live in a world of simulacra that do not refer to any originals; they are not even bad copies of a worthy original, so that, like in Plato, we only have to become aware of the cave we live in.

Opposing the centrifugal forces of modernity, driven by a centripetal impulse, Gioia’s poetry provides a refreshing sense of reality

and groundedness, even if this reality is a difficult thing to grapple with, burdensome and oppressive. In a world of simulacra, truth makes no sense; in Gioia's world, it becomes a necessity. It is the counterpart of Wallace Stevens' necessary angel of the earth, the angel of reality, who announces "in my sight you see the earth again" ("Angel Surrounded by Paysans" 496).^{vii} For Stevens, the pressure of the contemporary reality worked so intensely that the spirit needed imagination to counter it. However, he noted that "the imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real" (*The Necessary Angel* 6). Though painfully conscious, like most Modernists, of the disorientation that characterized his times,^{viii} Stevens managed to overcome the Modernist despair by placing his trust in the imagination, the Romantic concept that he reshaped to fit contemporary reality. Stevens' imagination has nothing of the prophetic quality or the transcendental impetus of the Romantic imagination; it exists only in relation with reality (in a "precise equilibrium"), which it ennobles. One might even say that imagination is the angel of reality, in so far as it abstracts from reality what is necessary for the psychic survival of the individual. However, it does so not in a mechanistic fashion, by selecting and arranging elements with a fixed purpose in mind. Following I.A. Richards' discussion of the difference between imagination and fancy outlined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Stevens remarks that the purpose imagination is working for when abstracting from reality is being created at the same time as the work itself. The work and its purpose are simultaneously created by imagination, whereas fancy does its work with an already fixed objective. It is interesting to note that Gioia shares with Stevens this view of the work and its purpose being simultaneously shaped: clearly stated in his *ars poetica* "The Next Poem," extended to comprise the creation of our own lives in "Curriculum Vitae": "We shape our lives / Although their forms / Are never what we meant" (39). Creation as contingency shaped by the work of poetic imagination is also rendered in one of Gioia's translations of Valerio Magrelli as "a tailor / who is his own fabric"^{ix} ("Homage to Valerio Magrelli" 60).

This may be the reason why, for Stevens, imagination and reality are so intimately bound together that a new era always gives rise to a new

imagination: “It is one of the peculiarities of the imagination that it is always at the end of an era. What happens is that it is always attaching itself to a new reality, and adhering to it. It is not that there is a new imagination, but that there is a new reality” (*The Necessary Angel* 22). With its ability to make the remote near and the dead live with “an intensity beyond any experience of life,” imagination is the domain of the poet, and the “measure of his power to abstract himself, and to withdraw with him into his abstraction the reality on which the lovers of truth insist” (*The Necessary Angel* 23). A possible poet “must be able to abstract himself, and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination” (*The Necessary Angel* 23). Stevens’ definition of the poet and poetry is not far from esotericism: imagination appears as a kind of alchemical alembic which distills reality, the crucible of transmutation. It is far from Platonism and Neoplatonism, though, which he criticizes for adhering to the unreal: he uses the word *possible* and not *ideal* to define the poet, while the title of one of his poems alludes critically to Plato, echoing W.C. Williams’ poetic manifesto:^x “Not Ideas about the Thing But the Thing Itself.” Thus, although more attuned to reality than the majority of his fellow Modernists, Stevens remains captive inside its atomistic, purely individual world; neither imagination, nor reality partake of the substance of universals.

With Gioia, American poetry witnessed not only a return to form, but also a return to the universal, or at least to a passionate search for it. Stevens’ necessary angel, which is quoted in the dedication of the volume *Pity the Beautiful*, becomes “The Angel with the Broken Wing,” a wooden statue imprisoned in an “air-conditioned tomb” (4) of a museum, whose incapacity to rise to its mission as a mediator between human suffering and divine mercy oscillates between the tragic and the merely pathetic:

There are so many things I must tell God!
The howling of the damned can’t reach so high.
But I stand like a dead thing nailed to a perch,
A crippled saint against a painted sky. (5)

It is obvious that for Gioia the necessary angel is no longer an imagination that abstracts from reality without in some way lifting it to God and

transforming it. “The thing itself,” untouched by emotion or dissociated from human life is meaningless and even threatening, yielding only a “useless insight”; in “Insomnia,” the punishment for a life devoid of love and meaning is ending up subjected to the power of the naked things:

Now you hear what the house has to say.
Pipes clanking, water running in the dark,
the mortgaged walls shifting in discomfort,
and voices mounting in an endless drone
of small complaints like the sounds of a family
that year by year you’ve learned how to ignore.

But now you must listen to the things you own,
all that you’ve worked for these past years,
the murmur of property, of things in disrepair,
the moving parts about to come undone,
and twisting in the sheets remember all
the faces you could not bring yourself to love.

How many voices have escaped you until now,
the venting furnace, the floorboards underfoot,
the steady accusations of the clock
numbering the minutes no one will mark.
The terrible clarity this moment brings,
the useless insight, the unbroken dark. (18)

By contrast, the unnamed character in “The Journey, the Arrival and the Dream,” who finds herself re-living the last moments of an unnamed ghost, departs from a reality “more sinister than any clerk’s revenge” (63) to find herself in a strange house, surrounded by things so tinted and saturated by another life that they manage to trigger the dream, or the vision of herself as the other, dying woman:

Emptying your pockets on the dresser, notice
How carefully you put down all the useless keys
And currency you’ve brought from home, so terrified
of scratching the patina of the varnished wood
that innocently reflects the lamp, your hand, the curtains,
and the badly painted cherubs on the ceiling,
who ignore you. Light a cigarette and watch
the lazy smoke creep up and tickle them
to no effect and realize you don’t

belong here in their world where everything
is much too good for you, and though the angels
will say nothing, they watch everything you do.

II
But you are also in another room
finishing a letter in a language
you don't understand, your dark hair pulled
back loosely in a bun, and the crucifix
you bring everywhere set upon the desk
like a photograph from home. (64)

The things that had belonged to the dying woman, humanized by her touch and transfigured by her feelings and thoughts now make up a world of their own, whose presence is so strong that the young woman feels she does not belong among them. They are no longer simply “things themselves,” but things that have acquired a history, and, having been so impregnated by human life, they manage to evoke it to foreigners in a kind of ghostly fashion. Thus, “the thing itself” has managed to transcend itself and cross the boundary into human life.

Even more repulsive than “the thing itself” is for the poet the world of simulacra, of appearances that pander to consumerist desire. In “Shopping,” an upscale shopping mall, one of the landmarks of consumer capitalism, is ironically compared to a temple. The speaker walks around the aisles like a modern prophet taking in the illusory attractions of the department store and invoking the gods of capitalism in a mock-religious tone:

Redeem me, gods of the mall and marketplace.
Mercury, protector of cell phones and fax machines,
Venus, patroness of bath and bedroom chains,
Tantalus, guardian of the food court. ...

Because I would buy happiness if I could find it.
Spend all that I possessed or could borrow.
But what can I bring you from these sad emporia?
Where in this splendid clutter
Shall I discover the one true thing? ...

There is no angel among the vending stalls and signage. (10-11)

There is no necessary angel, not even an angel with a broken wing, in the world of simulacra, a world of superficial beauty (“splendid clutter”), but devoid of truth. As such, this world is irredeemable and its “divinities of leather, gold and porcelain” (10) are powerless. But where does Gioia find what he misses in the department store? We can find a clue in the word *clutter*: true beauty, that Platonic splendor of truth, can be apprehended only in the meaningful order of form. This aesthetic adherence to a notion of truth makes it impossible to call Gioia’s poetry truly postmodern.^{xi}

In his critical introduction to *The New Formalism*, McPhillips defines Gioia’s poetry as “visionary realism”: on the one hand, he argues, there is “a tantalizing sense of the imminence – yet frustratingly elusive sense of transcendence – of the quotidian,” while on the other the poet, “like Stevens, is in quest of ‘another world... / behind the ordinary’” (43). The tension between the quotidian and the transcendental is at the heart of Gioia’s poetry; and so is the paradox, as McPhillips calls it, stated in “Words,” the opening poem of *Interrogations at Noon*, that “the world does not need words,” yet “the stones remain less real to those who / cannot name them, or read the mute syllables graven in silence” (3). The world and the word are of different orders, but if the poet acknowledges the gap between the *noumena* and the *phenomena*, he does not do it with a sense of fatalist resignation in the face of reality. Gioia sees the paradox inherent in reality: devoid of the transcendental creative power of the word, the world makes no sense. He also sees the creative, redemptive potential of this paradox. While for Stevens the word belongs to the order of imagination or abstraction, for Gioia it comes from an order which lies outside experience. The word is the other of the world, a power that comes from the outside and endows it with meaning. This is why ordinary reality is so tantalizing in its immanence, so full of *gravitas*. Outside language, outside poetry, the world has no meaning (“is less real”) for the human being. It is the thing itself which turns into an abstraction – and a menace.

The function of language and poetry (in short, of the word), which belong to a transcendental, magical order outside the realm of experience, is to transfigure reality or daily experience. Gioia is a magician of the quotidian as well as a sorcerer of words, in the tradition of Vladimir Nabokov: his fusion of the “heaviness” of reality and the “lightness” of

the “airy words we summon” produces “poetry as enchantment.”^{xii} The tougher the reality, the more intense the enchantment: Gioia does not shrink from touching upon the most delicate or forbidden of subjects; he is, as McPhillips notes, a great poet of love, but also of death, of ghostly visitations and that eerie quality of in-betweenness, of liminal ontology that some of his characters experience while being visited by or becoming ghosts. The healing musical quality of his verse transfigures death, suffering, loss, imperfection, all the limitations of human nature. The dignity of man resides neither in ignoring them, nor in trying to overcome natural limits by artificial/technological means, but in accepting and transfiguring them.

One of Gioia’s major themes is that of how we shape our identity and our lives. From a million of possibilities, we choose one (often quite accidentally, without too much consideration, as it happens to the character in “The Road,” who asks himself “Where was it he had meant to go, and with whom?”), and so all the others are forsaken. Oftentimes our choices are not free, but forced by circumstances, and then we ask ourselves “What would have been if...?” In “Equations of the Light,” the possibility of love is rendered through the extended metaphor of turning the corner into a “quiet, tree-lined street,” prompted by “the strange / equations of the light” (61). The magical quality of the light made the two unnamed characters believe that the “brief / conjunction of our separate lives was real,” yet the moment which “lingered like a ghost / a flicker in the air, smaller than a moth, / a curl of smoke flaring from a match,” seems to be “haunting a world it could not touch or hear” (61). The ghost, the moth, and the smoke suggest the impalpable quality of this possibility of love, which makes the speaker finally ask himself: “at the end what else could we have done / but turn the corner back into our lives?” (62).

The lure of the “what ifs” and “might-have-beens” is quite dangerous as it is an eternal temptation for human beings, whose “memory insists on pining / For places it never went,” as if “life would be happier / Just by being different” (“Summer Storm” 67). This is G.W.F. Hegel’s bad infinity,^{xiii} the endless proliferation of choices that can never be realized in one finite human life. The antidote to bad infinity is “making memory a blessing” and learning to be content with what one has

(“wanting nothing more than what has been”) (“The Lost Garden” 68). In “The Lost Garden,” the nostalgic speaker, thinking of his lost youth and love, imagines what would have happened if “we had walked a different path one day” (68). As the past cannot be changed, however, it is better “to learn by loss the cool subtraction of desire,” yet, at the same time, to be able to see “behind the wall a garden still in blossom” (68). This delicate balancing of impossible desires, acceptance of loss and nostalgic indulgence (another thing that connects Gioia to Nabokov) is the best recipe for surviving and at the same time preserving our humanity.

The possibility of different choices implies the possibility of a different identity, as our choices determine who we are. Identity is not a given, but a process in which we all contribute our share, as the motto to the first part of *Pity the Beautiful*, from the *Proverbs and Songs* of Antonio Machado testifies: “caminante, no hay camino / se hace camino al andar” (1). The worst mistake is not to make the wrong choice, but not to make any choice at all. The character in “The Road” misses out on his true identity, by not choosing to make a choice: “no one chose the way – / All seemed to drift by some collective will” (9). In “Interrogations at Noon,” the I of the speaker is reprimanded by his better self for failing to live up to his real potential:

Just before noon I often hear a voice,
Cool and insistent, whispering in my head.
It is the better man I might have been,
Who chronicles the life I’ve never lead. ...

“Who is the person you pretend to be?”
He asks, “The failed saint, the simpering bore,
The pale connoisseur of spend desire,
The half-hearted hermit eyeing the door?”

You cultivate confusion like a rose
In watery lies too weak to be untrue,
And play the minor figures in the pageant,
Extravagant and empty, that is you.” (5)

The theme of the better self is a familiar one in Spanish literature, and Gioia’s poem seems to resonate with Juan Ramon Jimenez’s “Yo no soy yo,” in which the Spanish author seemingly denies his identity in order to

establish the existence of a shadow self.^{xiv} Both Gioia's and Jimenez's poems deal not so much with a Freudian super-ego as with the possibility of difference within identity. The better self makes sense not as a self that is actually superior to the existing one, but as a possibility that leaves the question of identity open and by this "incompleteness," like in Jimenez: "el que quedara en pie cuando yo muera," denies the completeness/closure of life which is death.

The life-affirming quality of possibility is the subject of another hauntingly beautiful poem "Majority," in which Gioia imagines the trajectory of his first son who had died in infancy:

Now you'd be three,
I said to myself,
seeing a child born
the same summer as you.

Now you'd be six,
or seven, or ten.
I watched you grow
in foreign bodies.

Leaping into a pool, all laughter,
or frowning over the keyboards, ...

How splendid your most
mundane actions seemed
in these joyful proxies.
I often held back tears.

Now you are twenty one.
Finally, it makes sense
that you have moved away
in your own afterlife. (68)

This interplay between memory and imagination, the power of memory to revive the past allied with the possibility-designing capacity of the imagination opens the door to art and freedom: the Nabokovian all-encompassing memory, triggered by nostalgia, acts as an archive to the ordering principle of the imagination, and the result is an art that sets free both its creator and itself.

Yet, unlike Nabokov, who delighted in the creation of parallel

worlds, Gioia only plays with the power of possibility in order to recreate lost chances and lost lives. His sense of the mystery being played out in human life is so great that the idea of embodiment or incarnation figures prominently in his poetry. While in religion incarnation refers to the mysterious and unbreakable unity of the human and the divine, for Gioia incarnation may refer either to the mysterious unity of poetic form and content, the embodiment of truth in beauty or the coming together of the universal and the particular within the boundaries of human life. Incarnation works as *perichoresis*,^{xv} a theological concept that defines the mutual indwelling and the interpenetration of the human and the divine natures in Christ. The divine nature of Christ redeems human nature by assuming (taking onto itself) the evil and the imperfection in human nature. Form, on the other hand, works as a kind of divine order, which, by in-forming redeems the imperfections in human nature and the suffering these imperfections bring about.

Conclusions

However paradoxical it may sound, Gioia's poetry is simultaneously a return to form and a return to truth. Form is endowed with a creative agency of its own insofar as it serves as a means to a transformational end: it translates notions of truth (be it the truth of Nature, divine truth, our inner truth) into poetry, at the same time redeeming, by the order and harmony it brings about, the ordinary imperfect human life.

Gioia's use of form relates to, and simultaneously differs from Romanticism, Modernism and postmodernism. His formalism takes up the notion of a connection between Truth and Beauty, without presuming to identify one with the other. On the other hand, it resists both the Modernist obsession with dissolution and fragmentariness, and postmodernism's skepticism towards grand narratives: form is a coalescing agent, uniting different aspects and levels of reality; and narratives are instrumental in shaping both the individual and the social body. The power to name (point to and describe) and to tame (to translate dark or incomprehensible aspects of reality) which resides in language is the main means by which poetry contributes to the shaping of our social

and cultural world. Without it, we would be doomed to be either eternal witnesses to what we do not understand or to speak a language that is purely our own, separate from the reality of the world, incomprehensible, immanent. An engagement with form is always an engagement with a transformative force which, by compressing experience into words, lends meaning to our lives.

Notes:

ⁱ While all New Formalist poets share an interest in form and metrical verse, Keith Maillard remarks that there is no common aesthetic underlying their work (53); McPhillips notes that “New Formalism remains for me a generational movement concerned with purifying poetic diction” and identifies a common aim in the desire to return poetry to orality and a wider audience (xv). In *The Ghost of Tradition: Expansive Poetry and Postmodernism*, Kevin Walzer calls New Formalist poetry Expansive, and defines it along the same lines as McPhillips, as both concerned with reviving “traditional rhyme, meter and narrative in contemporary poetry” (1) and attempting “to expand a dwindling, university based audience by working in modes still relatively popular among a general audience” (2).

ⁱⁱ Although generally regarded as one of the foremost representatives of New Formalism, Gioia himself does not like to be called a New Formalist. In *Dana Gioia. A Critical Introduction*, Brennan points out the ways in which Gioia differs from the other New Formalist poets: first, in his poetics, “more complex than the manifestos of the movement might suggest,” then in his innovative use of form and meter, and thirdly, in his admiration for modernist poets like Wallace Stevens, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, and others (14-15).

ⁱⁱⁱ Trying to explain the emergence of non-metrical verse, Timothy Steele emphasizes the important influence that scientific progress exerted on modern culture. He remarks that artists in the nineteenth century felt there was a disparity between the rapid way the sciences progressed and the stale poetic productions of the Victorian era. Consequently, they saw fit that “art should model its methods on those of science,” an idea that gave rise to “the notion that art should be ‘experimental’ and that the artist should aspire to ‘breakthroughs’ and ‘discoveries’” (47).

^{iv} Kierkegaard was the author of a philosophical work on spiritual salvation entitled *Fear and Trembling* (1843), published under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio. Gioia celebrated Kierkegaard as a model of true faith in one of his poems from his latest collection, *99 Poems*, “Homage to Soren Kierkegaard.”

^v The five-rung ladder is also the ladder of the descending worlds from the Infinity (Creator) downwards in the esoteric doctrine of the Kabbalah.

^{vi} This is the last stanza of Frost’s poem: “The woods are lovely, dark and deep, / But I have promises to keep, / And miles to go before I sleep, / And miles to go before I sleep” (130).

^{vii} In “Angel Surrounded by Paysans,” Wallace introduced the mysterious figure of the necessary angel: “I am the angel of reality / Seen for the moment standing in the door. // I have neither ashen wing nor wear of ore / And live without a tepid aureole, // Or stars that follow me, not to attend, / But, of my being and its knowing, part. // I am one of you and being one of you / Is being and knowing what I am and know. // Yet I am the necessary angel of the earth, / Since, in my sight, you see the earth again” (496).

^{viii} Stevens noted that the rapid succession of catastrophes and changes in the modern era exerted an unbearable pressure on the human mind, which found itself at a loss on how to deal with reality: “for more than ten years, the consciousness of the world has concentrated on events which have made the ordinary movement of life seem to be the movement of people in the intervals of a storm. The disclosures of the impermanence of the past suggested, and suggest, an impermanence of the future. Little of what we have believed is true...” (*The Necessary Angel* 20-21).

^{ix} The work of poetic imagination is beautifully captured by Magrelli in this short poem translated by Gioia: “In the evening when the light is dim, / I hide in bed and collect / the silhouettes of reasoning / which silently run across my limbs / It is here I must weave / the tapestry of thought / and arranging the threads of my self / design my own figure. / This is not work / but a kind of workmanship. / First out of paper, then from the body. / To provoke thought into form, / molded according to a measure. / I think of a tailor / who is his own fabric” (“Homage to Valerio Magrelli” 60).

^x W.C. Williams’ poetic credo “no ideas but in things” (21) as well as Stevens’ anti-Platonic and anti-Kantian “Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself” are typical manifestations of the literary nominalism of modernists, which sought to abolish the Kantian distinction between *noumena* and *phenomena*. Their quest for “the thing itself” (“das Ding an sich”), which was supposed to do away with idealism and abstraction, is in fact, by its very impossibility, a return to a kind of Romantic over-valuation of poetry.

^{xi} The main argument of Walzer’s book on Expansive poetry is that it is “a manifestation of poetic postmodernism” (16), as it is based on what Fredric Jameson identified as one of the main traits of postmodernism, “the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past” (65-66). While the scope of the present essay makes it impossible to discuss this argument in relation to Expansive poetry, it should be stated that Gioia’s poetry is definitely not postmodern. Apart from its freedom to play with different styles and genres, one of the salient features of postmodernism, identified by Lyotard, was its “incredulity towards metanarratives,” (xxiv) which translated itself in a mode that can be termed ironic or parodical. Postmodern poetry plays with styles and forms in a self-conscious, parodical way which questions any ontological or epistemological priority and denies ideas of truth and reality.

^{xii} In “Poetry as Enchantment,” Gioia noted that “It is significant that the Latin word for poetry, *carmen*, is also the word the Romans used for a song, a magic spell, a religious incantation, or a prophecy ... The term *carmen* still survives in

modern English (via Norman French) as the word *charm*, and it still carries the multiple meanings of a magic spell, a spoken poem, and the power to enthrall” (danagioia.com).

^{xiii} Hegel makes a distinction between two types of infinity: true infinity and bad infinity. Explaining Hegel's notion of infinity Michael Inwood notes that: “True infinity differs from bad infinity in two respects: first, bad infinity excludes and contrasts with the finite and is bounded by the finite and therefore not really infinite or 'unbounded', while true infinity embraces the finite. Secondly, bad infinity proceeds in a straight line in an endless progression or regress, while true infinity is self-enclosed and comparable to a circle rather than a straight line” (439).

^{xiv} “I am not I. / I am he / who walks by my side without my seeing him, / whom sometimes I see, / and sometimes I forget. / He who serenely watches me speak without saying a word, / He who sweetly forgives when I hate, / He who travels wherever I have not, / He who will still stand up when I die” (Poemas del Alma, translation mine).

^{xv} The term *perichoresis* is used nowadays almost exclusively to refer to how the three persons of the Trinity are present in each other. However, the first conception of *perichoresis* appears in epistle 101 of St. Gregory of Nazianz, the epistle against the monophysite heresy of Apollinaris, who claimed that it was impossible for Christ to have possessed a human mind. St. Gregory explained that salvation would not be possible outside the intimate indwelling of the human and the divine natures in Christ. Later, St. John of Damascus (“De Fide Orthodoxa”/“Exposition of the Orthodox Faith”) used the concept to explain how the three persons of the Godhead could be identical and different at the same time: “The subsistences dwell and are established firmly in one another. For they are inseparable and cannot part from one another, but keep to their separate courses within one another, without coalescing or mingling, but cleaving to each other. For the Son is in the Father and the Spirit: and the Spirit in the Father and the Son: and the Father in the Son and the Spirit, but there is no coalescence or commingling or confusion. And there is one and the same motion: for there is one impulse and one motion of the three subsistences, which is not to be observed in any created nature” (584).

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