

Poetry Is Dead

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The Triumph of Death by Pieter Bruegel

Poetry is dead.

That's a reasonable conclusion anyone could make today, considering its complete obscurity and total lack of cultural influence. Aside from Hallmark cards, the occasional ad, children's books and mandatory undergraduate courses, we don't see much out of the oldest written expression of our language.

To truly understand poetry's position and the state of writing generally, everyone should read [Dana Gioia's](#) essay, "Can Poetry Matter?", first published in *The Atlantic* and reprinted [here](#).

Anyone involved in writing should read this essay. Bloggers, journalists, MFA students, poets, publishers and Twitter posters. We can't afford not to. Many poets and writers today continue their quiet progress along separate subway cars, not knowing where they got on, which stop might be theirs or even which city sprawls above the endless darkened tunnels that surround them. We all need to look up and let Gioia tell us where we are.

In an attempt to further make the point, here are some pertinent conclusions from the essay:

- Never before have so many books, periodicals and online publications been committed to publishing poetry, yet nobody knows this outside of poetry's insular readership, which is the smallest it's ever been.

- With nowhere left to go, poetry has retreated to academia, and must bow to its "publish or perish" doctrine. Quantity outweighs quality, because only the former can be trusted as a performance measure for our creative writing professors, which is what nearly all professional poets aspire to become.
- The lack of attention poetry receives outside academic circles leads to a complete lack of worthy criticism. Publishers, themselves poets, only review the work of colleagues to praise them out of professional courtesy, touting the work to an agreeing audience. Poetry reviews have become marketing tools and little else.
- This kowtowing has led to a lot of faulty praise for mediocre and bad poetry, increasing public skepticism about its value and ensuring its isolation.
- Such little poetry is culturally relevant. Its complete retreat from mainstream society has led to insecurity about its ability to comment on contemporary political and social issues.

Basically, poetry's retreat into its own academic subculture has created a system in which poets are rewarded for pumping out quick work only their colleagues will read, and their standing is based on published word count and association, not artistic merit. It's not just poetry, either. We've placed contemporary classical musicians and composers, dramatists and painters into similar pigeonholes. And we're far worse off as a culture for doing so. To quote Gioia directly:

There are at least two reasons why the situation of poetry matters to the entire intellectual community. The first involves the role of language in a free society. Poetry is the art of using words charged with their utmost meaning. A society whose intellectual leaders lose the skill to shape, appreciate, and understand the power of language will become the slaves of those who retain it—be they politicians, preachers, copywriters, or newscasters. ... Ezra Pound warned that

"Good writers are those who keep the language efficient. That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clean. It doesn't matter whether a good writer wants to be useful, or whether the bad writer wants to do harm. . . . If a nation's literature declines, the nation atrophies and decays."

Or, as George Orwell wrote after the Second World War, "One ought to recognize that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language. . . ." Poetry is not the entire solution to keeping the nation's language clear and honest, but one is hard pressed to imagine a country's citizens improving the health of its language while abandoning poetry.

The future of poetry and our language is of course known to no one, but Gioia makes some educated forecasts. I strongly urge everyone to take the time to listen to him.