Driving a Wedge Into the Prejudice Against Poetry

An Interview with Billy Collins

SUSAN KARWOSKA

Photo of Bily Collins copyright ©2007 by Charles Beckman.

This year's Joshua Ringel Memorial Reading featured the poet Billy Collins and was attended by an overflow crowd which responded to his work with an enthusiasm found more often at rock concerts or comedy clubs than at poetry readings. The broad, popular appeal of Collins' poetry flows from his ability to balance humor with a reverence for the details that make up a life and the sly wit with which he explores the vagaries of human emotion. Collins' work as U.S. Poet Laureate from 2001 to 2003 to create a larger audience for poetry through his Poetry 180 *project has drawn kudos from teachers, students, and numerous others. He is the author of eight collections of poetry, including* Sailing Alone Around The Room, *and* The Trouble With Poetry*; the editor of* Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry, *and* 180 More: Extraordinary Poems for Everyday*; and is currently a Distinguished Professor of English at Lehman College of the City University of New York. On the day after the reading, held in Baltimore on May 13th and cosponsored by Teachers & Writers Collaborative, The Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth, the Gilman School, and radio station WYPR, Collins sat for an interview with* Teachers & Writers *magazine, poolside on a sunny rooftop deck just off the Johns Hopkins campus.*

Susan Karwoska: It is often taken for granted that we want to create a greater audience for poetry, to expand the pool of readers. But what is it that you think poetry offers to this potential audience? If a high school student, for instance, were to ask in typical high school fashion, "What's the point of learning this?" how would you answer?

Billy Collins: I think the term "poetry" is kind of an absurd word at this point. I wish there were a better word for it. People have resistance to poetry for good reason. They have a lot of associations with that word, some of which are true and some of which are not. One association is that poetry is too difficult or unreadable or it's a kind of private language, which it is in some ways. Another association is with sentimentality, and a kind of drippy, bluebirds and bonnets school of thought. So there is a lot of reasonable resistance to poetry. I wouldn't try to talk a high school student into poetry. What I would do—what I did, really, by starting *Poetry 180*—is just to expose them to poems. We had an Internet program followed by two *Poetry 180* anthologies, each of which offered a hundred and eighty poems. Three times a hundred and eighty is quite a few

poems and I was convinced that no matter how hard-headed and fiercely resistant a high school student was, that out of all these poems there had to be one that would get their attention and snag them. And then if they liked that poem, if they liked something about it, they would experience a kind of cognitive dissonance, because the student would be in a position where they would have to say, "I don't like poetry, but I did like that thing I just read, and that's a poem." Then it's their problem, and you hope that that would lead them to the conclusion that, well, they don't dislike *all* poetry. And in this way a wedge is driven into their prejudice. If they are hooked by one poem, they might feel that there are others out there they could like.

When we talk about poetry now I'm not sure what we're talking about, not just in this conversation but in general. I wrote about this a little in the introduction to *Best American Poetry* last year. You hear people either theorize or pontificate that poetry is the voice of the soul, and the lyric expression of humankind or of our deepest passions. Well, I mean, that's just a certain kind of poetry. So as I said before, I think the word "poetry" has lost its utility.

When we think of poems today we can say several things about them: Most poems are fairly short—if you look at the poems in magazines they usually don't go on to the second page. So what do we have? We have a short, verbal expression that doesn't usually have a story, and that is written in lines, which are very basic to poetry. You could say it's an abbreviated imaginative lift, or an imaginative ride of some kind. It offers certain little thrills and I think one of the thrills is an imaginative jump into some other kind of place. It can take you very quickly to this new place. So you have this very efficient, short, verbal mechanism to move the mind into some other dimension. That dimension could be one of empathy, or it could just be some kind of pleasant disorientation, a movement into something mysterious or ineffable. And that's the basic little thrill that poetry tends to provide. I think one thing that turns people off to poetry is that the rhetoric attending discussions about poetry is so exalted. I think of poetry as providing these little pleasures, and I'd like to take the discussion of poetry from these exalted realms.

I never had the idea that all people should read poetry. I've said before that I think 83 percent of American poetry isn't worth reading, and that 17 percent is highly important.

SK: Is this because you feel the exalted language imposes false expectations of what a poem—or any work of art, I suppose—has to offer, or where it will take you?

BC: I think the ending of a poem is the place that the poem takes you. You could say that a poem is simply the only way to access its ending. It's just the path to its own ending and there's no way to get to the ending except through the poem. This seems really obvious, but if the ending of the poem is really good you realize, ah, that's what this has been all about, it's been leading me to this place where this ending has become a possibility.

SK: This leads to quite a wide-open definition of poetry.

BC: I'm trying to keep it as wide open as possible. At the same time, I never had the idea that all people should read poetry. I've said before that I think 83 percent of American poetry isn't worth reading, and that 17 percent is highly important.

SK: Why do you say the "83 percent" is not worth reading?

It's presumptuous to think that a stranger would be interested in your interior life. I think you have to seduce readers. I assume that no one is interested in my interior life. Most of my friends aren't, so why should a total stranger be?

BC: Well, because it's either emotionally presumptuous or incomprehensible. And sometimes both. It's presumptuous to think that a stranger would be interested in your interior life. I think you have to seduce readers. I assume that no one is interested in my interior life. Most of my friends aren't, so why should a total stranger be? If I read a poem where there's a presumption of interest on my part I just stop reading it because I need to be seduced. I need to engage with the poet on some level that precedes the release of psychic misery that's going to come later in the poem. If we start with your psychic misery I'm really not interested. And incomprehensible poetry—well, there are reasons for difficulty in poetry—but I'm talking about poems that are unreasonably difficult. I mean, a poem by John Donne is difficult and a poem by Wallace Stevens is difficult, but in those cases, they're worth working with. It's worth reading the poem over and over and taking notes.

SK: Because of the intelligence behind it?

BC: Yes, there's an intelligence behind it, and you have to work to get your intelligence to kind of overlap that intelligence to some degree. But I believe that there's another kind of difficulty in poetry that is basically camouflage and I don't want to overlap with a mind that is simply being experimental or obscure in order to create a hiding place. That's a very old fashioned way to think, I guess, but I think the poem is not completed until it gets into the mind of a reader and that the poet supplies half the exchange.

SK: Yesterday [at the Ringel Lecture] you addressed a question about difficulty in poetry by quoting from the statement by Randall Jarrell that most people believe that the modern poet "is unread because he is difficult. Some of the time this is true; some of the time the reverse is true: the poet seems difficult because he is not read, because the reader is not accustomed to reading his or any other poetry." (*No Other Book: Selected Essays,* by Randall Jarrell)

BC: 'Poetry is difficult because people don't read it', rather than 'people don't read poetry because it's difficult.' There's a real truth to that.

SK: Your attempt to change this, *Poetry 180*, has been around for five years now. Have there been any adjustments along the way, any surprises?

BC: The surprise has been how it's caught on. It's immodest to say but it actually worked. When I was made Poet Laureate I didn't know what that meant, exactly, but when I looked around at all the work my predecessors had done, all these activist cam-

paigns to increase the audience for poetry, I figured I should do something and immediately thought high school was the place to do it. So I thought well, I'll put up this list on the Internet, and if nobody reads it, I can still say, "Well, I did my part; I built the trough and filled it with water, and if no horses show up, that's not my problem, I can't drag them over." But the anecdotal feedback has been overwhelming. When I give readings, dozens of high school teachers come up afterwards and say that this book works in the classroom. "We read a poem a day in every class," some teachers will say, "and if I forget to read a poem the students will get mad at me and say, 'where's our poem for the day?'" So it actually worked, and it's not a matter of teaching poetry. It's just a matter of presenting the poems.

SK: You touched on this distinction at the reading when you said that there are other pleasures to be had from poetry besides those found in explication. In my own teaching experience I've found that when explication is the only model for teaching poetry, even teachers with a strong desire to teach poetry in their classrooms can feel unsure what to teach or how to teach it. How do you bring teachers on board? How do you respond to that anxiety that they don't know enough about poetry to be able to teach it, and what are other ways you can present poetry that might allay those anxieties?

BC: There are a lot of English professors who are afraid to teach poetry! They'll teach the Victorian novel, but throughout their career they'll find ways to avoid teaching poetry. So it's not just elementary and middle school teachers who have anxieties about it.

Usually a good poem is written by someone for whom the way of saying it is more important than what's being said, because there's not much really to be said anymore. It's already all been said.

Some of the pleasures of poetry—besides the pleasure of meaning—don't even require teachers. There's the pleasure of wordplay, for instance, of being attuned to language. I don't think poetry is for everybody. To like poetry you need to be a person who, even in conversation, is always thinking about the way things are said. You need to be someone who would notice if there's some unintentional pun, some odd phrase, so that it might even become the subject of the conversation. Those kinds of people are the people who are ready to read literature. Usually a good poem is written by someone for whom the way of saying it is more important than what's being said, because there's not much really to be said anymore. It's already all been said.

SK: If this is true—that everything has already been said—then how do you address this as a poet?

BC: John Ashbery's a great example. There's this acute self-consciousness about cliché, and the way he puts together—almost in a collage fashion—snippets of language, idioms, a profound image followed by a reference to Daffy Duck or some inane phrase, shows that this is obviously a poet who has his ears alert to all the little dips and nuances and peculiar moments in language. Poets who are content-oriented usually are not very sat-

> In college . . . I had kind of bought into the idea that obscurity and misery were the true components of poetry. . . . Reading Philip Larkin and other poets, I realized that you didn't have to be miserable, or rather that you could be miserable and funny at the same time, like Larkin.

isfying. Teenagers tend to be content-oriented—they're often writing because, as adolescents, they feel they're experiencing things that no one in the history of mankind has ever experienced, as I felt as an adolescent. Surely, no one could feel such alienation and painful self-consciousness the way I'm feeling it, so I've got to deliver this emotional novelty to the world in poetry. But once you get over that, once you realize it's already been said, people either stop writing, or they begin writing in earnest, because now they're liberated from subject matter and that's where the language fun begins.

SK: How did you find your way to poetry?

BC: It's a peculiar little story. My father worked for an insurance company on Wall Street for a lot of his life. The chairman of his company was rather philanthropic and at some point must have written a check to *Poetry* magazine. Anyway *Poetry* magazine came to his office on Wall Street and when I was in high school my father knew I was interested in poetry and he brought the magazine home to me every month. The poets that were being read when I was in high school were all white, they were dead, they had beards, and they had three names: William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and that's about as modern as we got. Now in *Poetry* magazine I suddenly started hearing these people who were speaking in contemporary language, and had the sound of talk. It sounded like they were speaking to me instead of speaking from the grave. So that was very influential. I'd read the magazine and if I came across a phrase I liked or an image that struck me I'd put a little flag there. Then I started imitating the poets I found in there, like Howard Nemerov, Karl Shapiro, and lots and lots of others.

SK: And in college?

BC: In college I wrote for the literary magazine. But by then I had kind of bought into the idea that obscurity and misery were the true components of poetry, so I wrote many poems for the literary magazine that sounded like poems and had a good verbal sense, but I couldn't tell you what they were about. They were camouflage. If the reader could figure out what it meant, I thought, then it wasn't poetry. I got out of that just by finding different influences. Reading Philip Larkin and other poets, I realized that you didn't have to be miserable, or rather that you could be miserable and funny at the same time, like Larkin.

SK: What is your poetry classroom like? What do you bring to it from your own work?

BC: I run my classes pretty much like everybody else, probably. You try not to turn everybody into a miniature version of yourself, but at the same time, it's tempting to try to do that. But there are certain things that can't be taught in a workshop, and I think there's a futility about a lot of poetry workshops, for me, because you can't teach rhythm.

Rhythm I find is impossible to teach. Either you have it or you don't, a sense of verbal rhythm. And you can point out to a poet that, well, it would be better if you had a couple more syllables in your last line because then it would go, ba-BOM, ba-BOM, BOM-bom. Some people just don't have an ear for it. It's like watching people on a dance floor—some people are better at it than others. So you can't convey verbal rhythm, and there's no way to teach metaphor. You can't get someone interested in making metaphoric connections if they're not interested in doing that. So if you have someone with no sense of verbal rhythm who's not interested in metaphor, then, [*laughs*] you should probably encourage them to go into woodworking or something.

SK: What can be taught, then?

BC: That's a good question. Procedure, I think, can be taught. That is to say, how to create a beginning, middle, and end. You can teach how a poem gets from the beginning to the end and how that usually involves a number of steps, or a number of swervings or maneuvers. That's protocol, in a way: what should come first.

I try to encourage students to back the poem up, and by that I mean that instead of starting in the middle of an experience, I ask them to write the first stanza about how they even came to want to write about it. "Where were you sitting and what were you doing when it occurred to you to write this poem?" I ask them. Or "Where are you sitting now as you compose?" That's just a way for them to say something to the reader that's indisputable. If you say, "I'm sitting here under this apple tree with a pen in my hand," the reader can't really disagree with that. I mean, that's not a very dynamic way to start every poem, but at least it's indisputable. Stephen Dobyns said that if you can get the reader to accept something kind of small and obvious at the beginning of the poem, the reader will be more likely to accept something more complicated and difficult later on, but first this point of engagement has to be made.

Humor used to be a no-no in poetry. If you were humorous that meant you had to go off to this little children's table and not be with the adults.

SK: Putting things in the right order is also essential to humor. Can you talk a little about how you use humor in your poetry?

BC: Well, you could talk about that in a procedural way, too. You could have one type of poem that starts out being funny and then gets less funny, or a poem that starts out being serious and then collapses on itself.

SK: Either way the turn creates tension in the poem.

BC: Yes. I always have to put a shift in my poems because the beginnings of them are so dull that they have to go somewhere else. If you start out in a very ordinary key, you're going to come up with something more interesting just to avoid being bored by yourself. Humor used to be a no-no in poetry. If you were humorous that meant you had to go off to this little children's table and not be with the adults, and the children's table was for people who wrote light verse. But William Matthews pointed out that a light

verse poet wants to be funny from beginning to end—and Ogden Nash is funny from beginning to end—so the first line and the second line and the last line, they're all equally funny. Whereas another use of humor is to deploy it at a chosen point in the poem. It's either a seduction strategy that you use in the beginning of the poem or it's a way of turning the poem on itself and dissipating the earlier seriousness through some kind of ironic deflation later on, but there's a switch from one to the other—you go in and out of the humor gear rather than just staying in it for the entire poem. This is a more interesting way to use humor and offers more possibilities than just trying to be funny all the time.[1]

You learn because of what we like to call literary influence, but it's really jealousy. When I read John Donne's "The Flea" in college, it was the first poem I'd read that made me insanely jealous. I couldn't believe that this was so sexy and funny at the same time, and I wanted to try to write something like that.

SK: Do you ask your students to read a wide range of poets for your classes? How do you direct their reading?

BC: Well, it's a kind of matchmaking I do. I think that's one thing a creative writing teacher can accomplish, and that is introducing this particular student to the right poet at the right time. I think you get better at that. You say to a student, "Have you read Robert Lowell, or have you read Philip Larkin, or Elizabeth Bishop? No? Well you should try reading Elizabeth Bishop." Maybe they'll come back to you and say, "I didn't like Elizabeth Bishop," which means it wasn't a good pick. Okay, then you ask, "Why didn't you like her?" and these poets become range finders. If the student is ready for the particular poet and you can put that poet on their desk, then you've really helped them. As someone said, the great teachers of literature aren't M.F.A. workshop conductors, they are the authors who are on the shelves in the library. Those are the great teachers.

You learn because of what we like to call literary influence, but it's really jealousy. When I read John Donne's "The Flea" in college, it was the first poem I'd read that made me insanely jealous. I couldn't believe that this was so sexy and funny at the same time, and I wanted to try to write something like that. I don't think I ever have, but.... So you have to try to put students together with poets who will make them jealous. And if you can do that, then you can just step out of the way because they'll be taught by that poet.

SK: You became Poet Laureate just before September 11, 2001. In the wake of the terrorist attacks, I remember hearing it said that poetry—art—had nothing to offer in the face of such a tragedy, that it was beside the point. At the same time, many people turned to poetry then as a way to try to make sense of the senseless, to find a way to grasp what had happened. Did the events of September 11th color your tenure as Poet Laureate, and your sense of your mission in that job?

---

[1] For more on poetic turns, see *Structure & Surprise: Engaging Poetic Turns*, ed. by Michael Theune. New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 2007.

There are countries . . . where people in government are poets and write poetry. That would lose you the election in this country! People here are very suspicious of poetry. It's thought of as eccentric and marginal and psychologically dangerous.

BC: It didn't affect my writing, but it did affect my life; people came at me with microphones to hear what I had to say as Poet Laureate because people *did* turn to poetry. We can wonder why. I mean, people wouldn't say, "This tragedy has happened and we're in a state of national confusion—let's go to the ballet!" People wouldn't say that, but they would look to poetry. Why? I think poetry makes you realize that you're not the first to show up with this emotion, so it gives you emotional perspective, and it also brings you into a community, a historic community of people who have felt these things. And of course the oldest message in poetry, which was felt by many unpoetic people after 9/11, is *carpe diem*. After 9/11 you heard people say, "Well, we were going to get married in two years, but we decided to get married next week. We realized how precarious life is and how tenuous things are, and we're not going to put this off." Well, poetry's been saying that since Roman times; seize the day because there aren't too many days left! The reason you have to *carpe* your *diems* is because you don't have an infinite number of *diems*. The whole shock of mortality that people felt after 9/11 is the reiterated message of Western poetry.

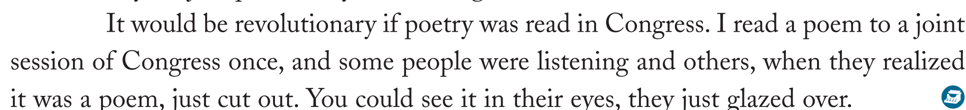
SK: You have said that you like to see poetry in unusual or unexpected places, that you'd like to see more of this. What other ideas do you have?

BC: I think that the way to get poetry to more people, and that's a noble ambition, is to put it in places where they don't expect to find it. There's already Poetry in Motion on public transportation; I got a poetry channel placed on Delta Airlines for a while when I was Poet Laureate; and poetry on the radio is good, though maybe not on television. People expect to find poetry in books and in the classroom, but I wanted to put poems on the PA system in high school—that was the idea of *Poetry 180*—so that you wouldn't have a teacher teaching a poem, you would just hear a poem and then you could either forget about it or you could ask the teacher to give you a copy if you wanted to read it again.

SK: What would it look like if poetry had what you felt was its rightful place in the national culture? How would things be different? And is there a place in the world now, in your opinion, that comes close to this ideal?

BC: There are countries, such as Poland and others as well, where people in government are poets and write poetry. That would lose you the election in this country! You remember Eugene McCarthy admitted that he wrote poetry, and I think he lost a lot of votes right there. People here are very suspicious of poetry. It's thought of as eccentric and marginal and psychologically dangerous. It means that you are psychologically deficient in some way, or just plain crazy. There's a grain of truth there, but….

It would be revolutionary if poetry was read in Congress. I read a poem to a joint session of Congress once, and some people were listening and others, when they realized it was a poem, just cut out. You could see it in their eyes, they just glazed over.



I Ask You

BILLY COLLINS

What scene would I rather be enveloped in
than this one,
an ordinary night at the kitchen table,
at ease in a box of floral wallpaper,
white cabinets full of glass,
the telephone silent,
a pen tilted back in my hand?

It gives me time to think
about the leaves gathering in corners,
lichen greening the high gray rocks,
and the world sailing on beyond the dunes—
huge, oceangoing, history bubbling in its wake.

Outside of this room
there is nothing that I need,
not a job that would allow me to row to work,
or a coffee-colored Aston Martin DB4
with cracked green leather seats.

No, it is all right here,
the clear ovals of a glass of water,
a small crate of oranges, a book on Stalin,
an odd snarling fish in a frame on the wall,
and these three candles,
each a different height, singing in perfect harmony.

So forgive me
if I lower my head and listen
to the short bass candle as he takes a solo
while my heart
thrums under my shirt—
frog at the edge of a pond—
and my thoughts fly off to a province
composed of one enormous sky
and about a million empty branches.

"I Ask You," from *The Trouble with Poetry*, by Billy Collins, copyright ©2005 by Billy Collins. Used by permission of Random House, Inc.