

EDUCATING THE IMAGINATION

The Laureate & the Loudspeaker

by Catherine Barnett

One of the main responsibilities of the poet laureate of the United States is to encourage an interest in poetry. Louis Untermeyer, who filled the post from 1961–1963, put it more metaphorically, saying he “was meant to act as a poetic radiator.” Since the introduction of the position in 1937, each of the 39 laureates (until 1987 the term was “Consultants in Poetry”) has fulfilled the charge in remarkably different ways.

Among their contributions: Robert Frost tried to get poets and presidents together (“Wouldn’t it be terrible,” he said, “if this country went down in history, like Carthage, without anybody to praise it?”); James Dickey lectured on “Metaphor as Pure Adventure” and played the guitar at his readings; to demystify poetry, Maxine Kumin hosted brown-bag lunches for women poets in the Library of Congress’ Poetry Room and gave a lecture called “Stamping a Tiny Foot Against God” (about American women poets writing between the two world wars); Joseph Brodsky came up with the idea of providing poetry in public places, including airports, supermarkets, and hotel rooms; and Robert Hass wrote a weekly column on poetry for the *Washington Post* and spoke at Rotary Clubs across the country to champion literacy and the environment. Elizabeth Bishop, perhaps the most private and restrained of laureates, advised people simply to stay home and read. The most widely publicized venture was probably Robert Pinsky’s “Favorite Poem Project,” which encouraged people across the country to share their favorite poems in audio and video recordings.

Billy Collins, the current poet laureate and the author of six collections of poetry (including *Picnic*, *Lightning*, *Drowning*, and *Sailing Alone Around the Room*) has brought to the position his own style and set of concerns. He is particularly interested in American high schools, which, he says, fascinate him “as a cultural phenomenon and as a psychiatric condition.”

“Probably behind most fanaticisms there’s some autobiographical drive,” he says. “I’m probably trying to rectify in some way what happened to me—and presumably to many others—in high school. I got interested in poetry in high school, but I found the atmosphere inimical to my interest.”

Photograph of Nantucket Town, Circa 1870/1871

At school, he recalls, he was reading “these rather antique poetry voices, mostly dead men with three names—William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, etc.” By chance, his father, who worked on Wall Street, began bringing copies of the contemporary journal *Poetry* home for him (otherwise it got thrown out at the office). “I looked into the magazine,” Collins says, “and it was like looking into Chapman’s Homer. The poems sounded cool to me—they sounded like they were talking, the imagery was fresh. They mentioned cars! I remember reading a poem by Thom Gunn about Elvis Presley and that was a real mindblower because I didn’t know you could write poems about Elvis Presley. I thought there was poetry—what you read in class, you read “Hiawatha” in class—and then when you left class there was Elvis. I didn’t see them together until I read that poem.”

With that experience as a model, Collins is using his term as poet laureate to try to bring contemporary American poetry to high school with a certain quiet vengeance. Or, more accurately, with a certain staticky vengeance: in his proposed program, called Poetry 180, he hopes participating schools will take the time each day to read—over the loudspeaker—one of the 180 contemporary poems Collins has posted on the Library of Congress website (loc.gov/poetry/180). Collins’s plan is to have some member of the school community—student, teacher, administrator, staff member—read a poem a day over the public address system, that all-important high school fixture, that occasional mangler and screecher of words, that until now unexploited source of poetic pleasure.

The poems, Collins insists, are not to be studied but simply to be heard. “The catch-phrase for Poetry 180,” Collins explains, “has been to make poetry a part of your everyday life in addition to a subject to be taught.” His two-fold aim is to give what he sees as “a more updated view of what’s happening in poetry today” and “to seduce high school students to an affinity for poetry.” He knows his task isn’t an easy one: “You can’t really get people to listen,” he says. “It’s up to the poems.” To this end, he’s chosen poems written “by people who have not forgotten their younger sensibilities.”

To select the 180 poems, Collins turned to his own library of contemporary poetry and climbed into his attic, where he keeps back issues of contemporary poetry journals. Wanting to give students poems they’d never find in an anthology—no predictable ones “like William Carlos Williams’s ‘Red Wheel Barrow.’” Collins kept certain criteria in mind. His primary concerns were content and length: “Clearly the poems have to be short, especially if you’re in high school and looking out the window. I made an effort to choose poems that will get their attention because I know adolescent attention is a difficult fish to catch.” The selections needed to be “short, somewhat grabby, and clear.” (Of course, as with the controversy over Collins’s appointment as poet laureate, there are many writers and readers of poetry who’d argue that these are not the most important—or even desirable—qualities in a poem.) Although he rejects the notion that these are “teenage poems,” he *did* select poems that he felt high school students would feel a “kinship” with—including, for example, a poem by a father about his daughter, and poems about music and cars. “Anyone could enjoy these poems,” he says, “though I did have a restless adolescent audience in mind.”

He also had to choose poems that were, in his term, “clean.” “High school audiences are generally very sexually informed these days,” he says, “but I did this defensively because this is a national program and I didn’t want to give a reactionary administrator in some high school an excuse to sabotage the program.”

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Collins makes no apologies for a certain uniformity—in taste, in style, in tone—that characterizes his online anthology, which for the most part is made up of narrative poems that pack either a humorous or a heartfelt punchline. “The choices are, I’ll admit, very much according to my taste. I wasn’t trying to be politically correct, or diverse. I think an awful lot of poetry is not worth reading, so I’m very hesitant to take up the banner that says ‘poetry’ on it and start marching around saying we should all read more poems.”

“Good music,” he says, “is music I like. I’m afraid good poetry for me is poetry I like. I’m not standing back and being objective and putting a little of this, a little of that and giving a mosaic of American poetry. I’m promoting what *I* think is good poetry and doing that shamelessly.” Perhaps it’s not surprising, then, that the very first poem posted on the website is Collins’s own “Introduction to Poetry,” a choice that demonstrates his healthy self-esteem and serves, in some ways, as an *ars poetica* for the whole project.

While Collins doesn’t want the poems collected in Poetry 180 to be turned into subject matter to be taught, he does see how they could be used as prompts for writing that would give students “a sense of the fluid creativity that takes place in the compositional process” and allow the poems to become “more of a living thing.” He suggests teachers might want to print out a poem from the Poetry 180 website and then ask students to write their own versions of it—for example, by simply using the title and first line(s) of the poem and continuing it in other ways. “It’s really somewhat accidental that a poem finds its own directions,” he says. “There are so many ways for a poem to go, so many linguistic crossroads you get into as you write. The resulting poem is really the outcome of numerous choices.” He wants students to realize that the poem “didn’t just arrive cooked, that it did go through this process and it’s a process, however successful the poem, that is somewhat arbitrary.”

In his own practice he often turns to an anthology of Chinese poetry before he writes: “I open it anywhere, basically just to calm me down and provide some models of clarity and simplicity because I try to begin poems—at least begin them—with something very simple. And you can start anywhere, really.”

If Collins’s tenure as poet laureate is anything like his predecessors, he’s unlikely to get much writing done. “Being in some sense National Poetry Administrator,” Howard Nemerov (1963–64) wrote, “one would not expect to write poems oneself; there would be something a little ludicrous in that. One’s physical position, sitting on the top right-hand corner of the Collected Dreams of Humanity... was somehow not quite right for adding a few more small dreams to the stack.” (Elizabeth Bishop, however, did write her wonderful and disturbing “Visits to St. Elizabeth’s” during her tenure as poet laureate.)

As did his predecessors, Collins is likely to spend much of his time responding to questions posed to him by anyone whose interest in poetry he has piqued. Anthony Hecht advised his successors “to err on the side of patience, good will, and generosity” in their epistolary responses to the endless numbers of unsolicited manuscripts that land on the poet laureate’s desk. Frost, considerably less generous, resented this part of the laureate’s task: “You cannot correct people into poets,” he said. “They should go out and live to improve their poetry.”

If Collins’s tenure as poet laureate is anything like his predecessors, he’s likely to receive praise in unexpected venues. After a reading at a Southern university, then poet laureate Stephen Spender, for example, found himself facing an elderly Southern woman who said she had written a poem about him. She asked if she could recite it. When Spender said yes, she recited the whole poem: “Stephen Spender, / Splendor.” Then she bowed and went on her way.