Filling Tennyson's Shoes & Other Official Capacities

A Tête-à-Tête with the Laureates

BILLY COLLINS

U. S. Poet Laureate 2001–2003

Christina Davis: In 1985, the position formerly known as the "Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress" received a rather Anglophilic facelift by being redesignated "Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry." Do you care to hazard a reason for this change? And, would you say that the U.S. laureateship has changed in more essential ways since its inception in 1937?

Billy Collins: The title "Poet Laureate" was added to the rather bureaucratic title "Consultant" specifically because of the lobbying efforts of a senator from Hawaii. "Spark" Matsunga, as he was called, petitioned Congress for years to promote our man from consultant to laureate—God knows why. I suppose it is part of America's Anglophilia along with our appetite for Burberry raincoats and English jams. The offices are very different. We are two countries separated by a common poetry laureateship. The Laureate of England is a member of the royal household; ours is an employee of the Library of Congress. The Laureate of England writes occasional poems; ours is under no obligation. And recently, the U.S. laureateship has been used as a platform from which to launch national poetry programs. My program, called Poetry 180 for the 180 days of the school year, is aimed at getting poetry into the high schools—without having to hold students by the back of the neck while covering scansion.

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CD: You assumed the role of Poet Laureate in the Fall of 2001, a mere month after the events of September 11th, and your duties have continued throughout the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Has this been a challenging time to be laureate? How have you balanced your personal political convictions with your representative national role?

BC: Some say all poetry is political, but we all know it when we read a political poem. You could just as easily say all human action is political, but we all know the difference between taking out the garbage and lying down in the road in front of a tank. My poetry has never been political in the obvious sense, and I have resisted pressures in that direction for fear of straining my voice. I can only continue to write out of the voice that seems to be mine, or at least closer to mine than anyone else's. Poetry is the place where ambiguity and ambivalence go when they need to find a home. There is no room for ambiguity in a political position, no room for ambivalence in the mind of a suicide bomber. And what poet wants to breathlessly deliver the news that war is bad? Not me.

CD: Last year you had an opportunity to meet with your British counterpart, Andrew Motion. Did you swap notes on what it's like (and what it means) to be the laureate in your respective countries? Would you say from your various trips to the U.K. that poetry plays a larger role there than it does in the United States?

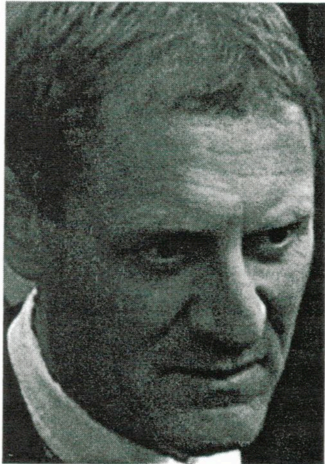
BC: I think the Poet Laureate has a higher profile in England because the title, some three-and-a-half centuries old, is very tied into the national identity. Plus, the English are just more title-conscious. In the States, we just don't have room for viscounts and equerries. Poetry is more widely reviewed in the U.K. The *TLS* keeps readers very up-to-date in poetry (books and gossip) whereas the *New York Times Book Review* remains largely oblivious. It's hard to get a full review there unless you're dead. And that's not even a sure thing. Another reason Americans are less aware of the title is that our laureate changes so frequently—every one or two years. Every time you turn around, if you even bother to turn around, there's a new one. The 47 years that Tennyson wore his leaves on his head gave people time to get used to him,

CD: What do you believe accounts for the small number of creative writing programs in Britain—compared with the 300-or-so creative writing degrees available in the United States? Do you think that there's something distinctly American about the writing workshop tradition and the assumption that creative writing can (and should) be taught?

BC: Britain is like we were before the 1970s when these M.F.A. programs started to pop up all over the country. Here, and everywhere, poetry used to be one of the great solo acts, not the communal project it has turned into. It could be part of the huge business that higher education has become in the States. You can find college courses in just about any subject from Poker Literature to Turf Management. Whatever brings in tuition. And there are a lot of aspiring writers out there ready to do this verb called "workshopping." It could be as simple as supply and demand in a free market (free verse) economy.

CD: What British poets (or poems) have had a significant impact on your work?

BC: Well, as a university professor, I have been studying and teaching British poetry most of my life. One learns from everyone one reads—learns what to do, what not to do—learns what is possible. An eye-opening book was the Alvarez anthology which introduced me to Ted Hughes, Thom Gunn, and others. I loved Gunn's motorcycle poems. I didn't know you were allowed to write poems about motorcycle gangs and Elvis. And Larkin, of course, the bitter moods ("Aubade") and the softness underneath ("At Grass"). If I had to hold onto only one poet though, it would be Coleridge for the conversation poems, especially "This Lime Tree Bower My Prison." I would ask if I could hold onto John Clare, as well.



ANDREW MOTION

Current Poet Laureate of England

Christina Davis: Since its inception in 1668, the role of the Poet Laureate of England has been to "compose poems for court and national occasions." William Wordsworth notably refused to fulfill the occasional-poem function of the job, and you—though you have penned poems for such occasions as Prince Edward's wedding—have also published a provocative protest poem against the war in Iraq. Could you comment on the ways you've sought to expand the laureate's mission, and how political activism is compatible with the laureateship?

Andrew Motion: In my mind's eye I've divided the laureate job into two parts: a writing part and a doing part. The writing part traditionally involves producing poems about events in the royal calendar. I've done a few of these, but have involved them in a bigger picture of poems about national subjects—including the war in Iraq. (Why shouldn't a laureate be political? Politics are part of life.) The other part is "doing"—which essentially means promoting and protecting poetry within schools, etc. In other words, I spend a lot of time visiting schools and running workshops, sitting on committees, lobbying the government.

CD: Since the 19th century, and as late as the Donald Allen anthology *New American Poetry* (1960), poets in the U.S. have tended to define themselves in opposition to British poetry, whereas British poets have by and large not required this dichotomy to inform their identity. Would you agree? If so, do you think we've reached the stage where we can begin a more fruitful exchange? Have you seen signs of a growing "commerce between us"?

AM: I wish I could say there was more "commerce" between U.S. and U.K. poetry. Compared to 30 years ago there seems less. Why is this? Something to do with different traditions (which in turn is to do with the different ways we did or didn't engage with modernism). Something to do with the different relationships our poets have with academies. Something to do with being divided by a common language. Something to do with publishing and money. In any or all events, it's a pity.

CD: As an American living in England, I was struck by the extent to which poetry pervaded the culture: people in pubs spontaneously recited poetry; the BBC aired poetry readings on a regular basis; banks and law firms hired poets to pen poems in their offices; and poems by the laureate actually made the headlines. Would you say that poetry plays a larger role in the day-to-day life of Britain than it does in the United States?

AM: I don't know enough about the States in this respect—but I do feel that the Brits, for all their notorious hostility to and mockery of much contemporary writing, feel it belongs in a tradition which is crucial to our sense of identity. We think it's something we do well. And over the last generation or so I'd say that some of this suspicion-of-the-contemporary has dissolved.

CD: What American poets (or poems) have had a significant impact on your work? Moreover, what if anything do you believe British poets can gain from reading American poetry?

AM: Dickinson, Whitman, Frost (mightily), Moore, Bishop (mightily), Lowell—and in the last few years I've been more than usually interested to read Graham, Dove, Olds, Collins—and John Ashbery, of course. By reading American poetry, students can discover a whole new range of possible subjects, and a formal adventurousness that is deeply welcome. They can also see—in some cases—the disadvantages of writing for and being (apparently) sustained by small local or academic coteries.

POET LAUREATE QUIZ

1. How many women have been appointed Poet Laureate of England?

2. What Hollywood actor's father was Poet Laureate of England from 1967–1972?

3. How much was Alfred Lord Tennyson paid for his post?

4. Name the first American poet to be designated Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry?

5. Who was the first woman to serve as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress?

6. Which American poet was appointed laureate in 1952, but was unable to serve?

ANSWERS

1. None. 2. Daniel Day-Lewis (his father was Cecil Day-Lewis). 3. Tennyson raked in £72 a year from the Lord Chamberlain's department, and £27 from the Lord Steward's in lieu of a butt of sack. 4. Robert Penn Warren (1986–87). 5. Louise Bogan (1945–46). 6. William Carlos Williams (due to failing health).