

Engaging the Senses to Make Sense: Performing Autoethnography in Selected Poems by Two Poet/Educators

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Abstract

In a poem entitled “Reading Allowed,” performance poet Taylor Mali says:
once upon a time we grew up on stories
and the voices in which they were told
we need words to hold us
for the world to behold us
for us to truly know our own souls.

In a similar vein, Billy Collins, Poet Laureate of the United States from 2001 to 2003, says that “it’s a good thing to get poetry off the shelves and more into public life.” During the past decades, both poetry and personal narrative have found their way to previously restricted territory such as academic research and cognitive science through autoethnography and embodied cognition, respectively. “Autoethnography” is a research method that seeks to describe (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) within a cultural context

(*ethno*). Eventually, it took different shapes, including “performing autoethnography,” which uses story and poetry as forms of resistance within a profession. Tami Spry calls this type “An Embodied Methodological Praxis,” that bases research on the senses, grounding it in the body. (Spry, 2001) In this respect, Spry agrees with George Lakoff’s theory of embodied cognition that defies the claim of the “disembodied mind,” blurring the line between poetic knowledge and scientific truth. Both Collins and Mali are poets and educators. In 2005, they shared the stage in an event entitled “Page Meets Stage,” embodying their resistance to the established standards in both poetry and teaching. The paper intends to study selected poems by these two authors as examples of performance autoethnography in the light of Lakoff’s theory of embodied cognition.

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The two poet/educators in question are Billy Collins (1941-) and Taylor Mali (1965-). Autoethnography¹ is simply a combination of three parts: “auto,” “ethno” and “graphy.” In other words, it is a description of a personal narrative within a cultural context. The selected poems are performative in two respects. The first is that they were performed on stage by the poets. The second is that they are performative acts of resistance, ironically resisting the norms that they represent. Again, the senses are central in dealing with the poems for two reasons. Firstly, performance itself is an act of sensory embodiment of the meaning that the poets seek to convey. Secondly, in order to be able to make sense of the poems, the employment of the senses is central. In short, the poems in study are embodiments of a personal experience within a cultural framework.

On the twelfth of November, 2005, Billy Collins and Taylor Mali shared the stage at the Bowery Poetry Club as an inauguration of a series of events entitled “Page Meets Stage” which, ever since, as Mali mentions on the website that carries the same title, has been pairing on stage together two poets, one more “literary” and the other more “performative.” This specific event was not just a meeting of two poets who represented two different and sometimes warring types of poetry. For both Collins and Mali are educators as well as poets. According to the Library of

Congress, Billy Collins, who was appointed Poet Laureate for two terms, 2001-2003, is a “Distinguished Professor of English” at the City University of New York. He is also Senior Distinguished Fellow of the Winter Park Institute in Florida, and an MFA faculty member at the State University of New York. As for Mali, he started his career as a school teacher, and now he makes his living as a “touring poet and an advocate for teachers... traveling around the world, teaching poetry, talking to teachers about how to teach poetry” (*What Teachers Make* 4). Each of these two poets might have a different story to tell, but they both have one narrative that found its way to the stage in this shared poetry performance. To start with the narrative, the two poets agree on the central role of poetry and education in the transformation of society at large. This can be clearly seen in “Introduction to Poetry” (2003) by Collins and “What Teachers Make” (2012) by Mali. The present paper attempts to study selected poems by these two authors, with special reference to these two poems as examples of “performing autoethnography.”

Anthropologist David Hayano is generally credited for coining the term “autoethnography” in his article “Auto-Ethnography: Paradigms, Problems, and Prospects” (1979). He uses it to describe a new subjective, insider stance to one’s own culture. In other words, it is a study of a cultural phenomenon as a personal lived

experience by the author/researcher. He states that although autoethnography is “not a specific research technique, method or theory, it colors all three” (99). As Carolyn Ellis notes in her article “Autoethnography,” the term has now become a “broad rubric” under which writers from a wide range of disciplines write their personal narratives (48). The story behind the emergence and rising popularity of autoethnography is interesting. On one end of the line, Art Bochner, Distinguished Professor at the University of South Florida, voices his frustration to his partner Carolyn Ellis. He wonders why authors are not encouraged to use the first person in academic writing. The evident answer is that according to “the prevailing norms of scholarly discourse,” this is how “academic writing” should be (“Autoethnography, Personal Narrative,” 733-4). Together, Ellis and Bochner took up the case for establishing autoethnography as a research method where first-person narrative is adopted as the primary study tool. In the “Overview,” autoethnography finally takes shape as an “approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand a cultural experience” (Ellis et al). Besides giving a definition of “autoethnography,” the process of how other scholars in sociology caught the spark is described. They began to realize that “facts” and “truths” that scientists found were tied to the master narrative that they represented. The article explains how the platform was already prepared for discontent by postmodernists such as Barthes, Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault who questioned the relationship between text, author and audience. Alongside with this, scholars started to realize that social sciences are closer to literature than to

physics, to story rather than theory. Stories “introduced unique ways of thinking and feeling, and helped people make sense of themselves and others.” As Mali puts it in his poem “Reading Allowed”:

Once upon a time we grew up on
stories
And the voices with which they were
told
We need words to hold us,
For the world to behold us,
For us to truly know our own souls.
(*The Last Time as We Are* 20)

Eventually, as the “Overview” explains, autoethnography became both product and process. In his later book *Coming to Narrative* (2014), Bochner narrates his journey on the road to meaning through narrative inquiry and the dark turns where he had to take chances till he reached the sense of ending. He speaks about times when his academic self has been cut off from his experiential self, inhabiting a dreary world of theory and objectivity which has no place for human feelings; a scientific world “devoid of spirituality, emotion and poetry.” He finally manages to heal his divided self by “bringing the academic and the personal into conversation with each other” through autoethnography (291).

The two poems which are in focus in this paper, Collins’s “Introduction to Poetry” and Mali’s “What Teachers Make” came to existence as a result of a personal-ethnographic experience. The occasion in both cases was an ambitious social project which developed into a book: Collins’s *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry* (2003) and Mali’s *What Teachers Make* (2012). As Laureate, Billy Collins struggled to bring poetry back to a society which, as Regis reported on World

Poetry Day 2013, has come to develop a kind of “verse-phobia.” He “worked tirelessly to bring home the point that poetry is not an effete art that exists as an endangered species in the protected cage of university English departments” (Renkl). Collins strongly believes that poetry should play an important role in our daily lives. “Poems,” he says, “can inspire and make us think about what it means to be a member of the human race. By just spending a few minutes reading a poem each day, new worlds can be revealed.” This conviction urged Collins to start a project which he called “Poetry 180: A Poem a Day for American High Schools.” For the purpose of this project, he collected 180 modern poems in a book entitled *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry* (2003). Besides editing this collection, he wrote an introduction, explaining the goals of the book. For the 180 days of school, students would be exposed to a poem a day with no obligation of response. The number 180 also reveals the intention of the book to effect a 180 degree turn back to poetry (xvii). The words “turning back” emphasize Collins’s belief that we are born with a natural love of poetry that is lost along the educational journey. He trusted that eventually, those who were taught to hate poetry would come across a poem that they “find themselves loving irresistibly” (xx). The first poem included in the collection is Collins’s poem, “Introduction to Poetry.”

Like Collins, Mali’s poem was the outcome of a personal experience that reflects the standards of his society at large. In the “Introduction” to his book *What Teachers Make*, Mali narrates how the book came to existence because of a poem. His story goes as follows:

In 1997 I went to a New Year’s Eve party where an arrogant young lawyer insulted me and the entire teaching profession. Teachers are so overworked and disrespected, he reasoned, that anyone who would choose to become a teacher today must be of questionable intelligence and therefore shouldn’t really be allowed to teach in the first place... At the party that night I was so furious inside that I couldn’t come up with a clever comeback, so I bit my tongue and laughed politely. But the next day, January 1 1998, I wrote a poem that was the forceful response I wish I had delivered that night. The poem was called “What Teachers Make” (1-2).

It was not before three years that the poem was published in a book, but feedback started immediately after Mali posted it on his website. It struck a chord all over the country and emails started flooding from teachers who felt humiliated for being judged by their paychecks rather than by the difference that they made. The poem started to be widely circulated and quoted until it reached newspapers as well as the Public Radio. Eventually, a video of Mali performing the poem was posted on YouTube. This literally caused a boom and respondents started actually to make a career shift or go for a major in education. Mali was encouraged to launch the New Teacher Project. He started a series of tours with the purpose of advocating the profession of teaching. During the process, he would compose and perform poetry about the teaching profession. For example, he would write a poem to a student called Lily Wilson who had a verbal tic, involuntarily repeating the word “like” so frequently that her classmates

named her “Like Lilly Like Wilson,” and how he managed to help her to drop the habit in the process of teaching her how to make a case for an argument. He describes the feeling of finally being able to teach somebody something, and how this gave him hope that he could change the world one student at a time (87). Another poem, “The Miracle Worker,” is about simple but significant incidents such as when Mali says “If two boys are fighting, // I’ll break it up // But if two girls are fighting, // I wait until it’s over // And then I drag what’s left // To the nurse’s office.” Or he would tell about a girl who was looking for a pen in her backpack, and while she was not looking, he put a pen on her desk. When she noticed the pen she took it as no less than a miracle performed by the teacher, the “miracle worker.” Mali exclaims: “education is the miracle. // I’m just the worker. // I’m a teacher / And that’s what we do” (*The Last Time As We Are* 36). Mali wrote several other poems that he performed on his tours. The set goal for the project was to convince one thousand people to become teachers (*What Teachers Make* 4-5). After a long journey, Mali celebrated the fulfilment of his target in an event on the seventh of April, 2012, at the Bowery Poetry Club.

The fact that the two poems in question were conceived within the context of a social project is not the only reason why they are considered as autoethnographic. A close look at the poems shows that the personal element, “auto,” and the cultural element, “ethno,” are revealed through the use of pronouns. The “I” in the two poems is set against an “other” which is embodied in the “them” and “they” in Collins’s “Introduction to Poetry,” and in the “he” and “they” in Mali’s “What Teachers Make.” Collins starts his poem

with the words: “I ask *them* to take a poem // and hold it up to the light.” It is understood that the pronoun “them” refers to the students, but the fact that the poet chooses to use it without a specified reference suggests that he is referring to a larger entity, which is society at large. After a lot of futile efforts on the part of the poet, he desperately cries at the end of the poem: “But all *they* want to do” is to torture the poem in order to extort a confession out of it (5, emphasis added). The same applies to Mali’s poem which goes as follows:

He says the problem with teachers
is,
*What’s a kid going to learn from
someone*

*who decided his best option in life
was to become a teacher?*

He reminds the other dinner guests
that it’s true
what they say about teachers:

*Those who can, do; those who
can’t, teach* (7, emphasis in
original).

Mali does not specify the identity of the “He” because the lawyer to whom the pronoun refers symbolizes the whole community. This is further revealed in the use of “they” without a specified reference since the lawyer presupposes the consensus of all the hearers, and presumably the whole society. Near the end of the poem, Mali shows his defiant stance through a series of sentences that begin with the personal pronoun “I,” where he highlights the significant role of the teacher. Therefore, the two poets place themselves against a culture that has chosen to deride both teachers and poets, let alone teachers of poetry.

The two poems are not just autoethnographic, they are also “performative” in the sense that they are transgressive acts against the master narratives within a profession. This type of autoethnographic writing is known as “performing/performative” autoethnography. The term is used by Tami Spry to distinguish a specific kind of autoethnography which works within the context of a profession in order to reveal the “*understory* of hegemonic systems” (“Bodies of/as Evidence” 603, emphasis in original). She defines it as follows:

Performative autoethnography is performative due to its attempt to critically interrupt dominant narratives by offering a performance that breaks normative patternized behaviors and remakes a transgressive copformance with others in sociocultural contexts and histories (604).

Performativity, as described in the above quotation, is an act of resistance against prevailing norms; a reversal of the dominant discourse. Sally Denshire describes it as “a transgressive account” which “opens out a professional’s life, remaking power relations in the process” (1). It is a rewriting of both self and culture (3). It is the willingness to go through the “discomfort experienced at stepping outside your own received frame” (2). Performativity as such belongs to a long line of disciplines, such as linguistics, performance and gender studies. Simply put, it refers to the power of the word to effect a change in the world. The acknowledged source for this approach to language is John L. Austin’s book *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) where he distinguishes between declarative language that can be judged as true or

false, and performative language that is a speech act which in itself is a process of creation (6). Various critics exploited this theory for diverse ends, including Judith Butler’s theory of gender as described in her book *Bodies that Matter* (1993, 11-12). Throughout this wide range of disciplines, as Denshire contends, performative autoethnographers started to challenge the dominant discourses within their professions, offering new forms of performance.

One of the main fields that witnessed this type of writing, as seen in Bochner’s predicament mentioned earlier, is that of education. Ronald J. Pelias, former Professor at the Department of Communication, University of Illinois and current teacher at the University of Louisiana, sums up the condition in his book *Methodology of the Heart* (2004). He says:

The crisis of faith appeared in academic circles when a growing number of faculty discovered that the university life was not what they expected or bargained for. They were teaching students who seemed more interested in grades than learning... They felt empty, despondent, disillusioned... Then some scholars began ... to question why... only certain forms of discourse counted as knowledge... why their mind should be split from their body, why they had to keep their emotions in check, why they could not speak from the heart (10-11).

According to Carl Leggo, Professor at the University of British Columbia, Canada, the working conditions of school teachers are not any different from university

professors. In the article “The Heart of Pedagogy,” he notes that education is mostly focused on conserving the conventional structures and expectations of the dominant cultural discourse (444). Leggo argues that both teaching and poetry are meant to be life-changing experiences. He explains that the word “poetry” comes from the Greek root, “*poesis*,” which means “to make.” Citing Heidegger as evidence, Leggo contends that “the poetic is the basic capacity of human dwelling” (Heidegger 226). Therefore, teaching in general, let alone teaching poetry, involves a capacity for poetic dwelling. Both poetry and education are meant to be transformative and not just informative. Expressing the need for this kind of poetic knowledge in research as well as in education, Prendergast and Leggo write:

We need spaces for many kinds of research, including research that focuses on poetic knowing, the kinds of knowing that can be gained in the experience of stories and myths, art and music, dance and performance (1466).

This type of poetry, as Sandra Faulkner mentions in her article “Concern With Craft,” has been labeled as “poetic transcription,” “ethnographic poetics,” “interpretive poetry” or “autoethnographic poetry” (219).

Both Collins’s “Introduction to Poetry” and Mali’s “What Teachers Make” belong to the trend of performative autoethnography. However, while Mali’s poem is a protest against the social attitude towards the teaching profession at large, Collins criticizes the methods of teaching poetry in particular. Mali’s poem is an act of resistance and not just a defense of

teaching as a profession. It is a protest against the reversal of standards in a materialistic society that evaluates people according to the money that they make, regardless of the enormity of their contribution to society. In the poem, the lawyer poses the question: “I mean, you’re a teacher, Taylor. // Be honest. What do you make?” By the word “make,” he refers to the money that he earns. But for the poet, Mali, “making” has a totally different sense. He answers indignantly:

You want to know what I make?

...

Here, let me break it down for you,
So you know what I say is true:
Teachers? Teachers make a difference!
Now what about you? (8)

In the book *What Teachers Make*, Mali explains further that it takes a lot of courage and conviction on the part of the teachers to hold on to their career. He says:

The truth is that teachers don’t teach for the money. The people who enter this profession these days do so because they want to make a difference working with children. What do teachers make? We make sacrifices. Daily. We do what we can do to make ends meet. We’re educated professionals who are passionate about what we do (152).

He adds:

That’s what teachers make: the promise to leave every student they teach better prepared for the future than they were when they entered the class at the beginning of the year. On the most basic level, that’s just what we do (193).

Mali confesses that this is what teachers really aspire to “make,” that is, to “change everything.” This is how a teacher is paid. He aspires to teach his students not just to question authority, but also to speak with it. He prefers to teach his students “to be people who know how to doubt rather than people who sound as if they never had any doubts at all” (67). The poem is an act of revolt against the status quo.

Mali does not separate his identity as a teacher from that of the poet. At a teacher conference in Illinois (2017), he said:

But in a very tangible way poetry and teaching kept leading me back to the other one. I went to Kansas State University to become a better poet, but all graduate students in English were required to teach freshman composition as well. And that’s when I found that I truly loved teaching. It was in my pursuit of poetry that I found I have an equal passion for teaching. That’s what led me to write the poem “What Teachers Make” (*Navickas*).

Mali believes that both poetry and teaching should not just instruct but also induce joy. He even created the hashtag “#edujoy” to show that teaching can be joyful for both instructor and instructed. The poet and the teacher in Mali meet in the very word “make” that the lawyer used derogatively. Both poetry and teaching are a process of “making.” They make a difference, and this in itself carries its own reward: the joy that no money can buy. This reminds of an incident that Collins mentions about an old student of his that he ran into on a subway train. That student, who had become an oncologist, sat beside Collins and recited a poem by Emily Dickinson that he had memorized

fifteen years earlier. Collins says with delight: “*And, just like that, the crowning moment of my teaching career took place on a subway train*” (*Chlossberg*).

Billy Collins’s book *Poetry 180* is also an act of resistance against the prevailing educational system, but he focuses on the methods of teaching poetry at schools. In the introduction to this book, he argues that high school is often “the place where poetry goes to die” (xvii). The classroom strategies “work effectively to kill the poetry spirit” by the relentless “hunt for Meaning” and dissecting the poem for extracting various literary devices which become “a field of barbed wire that students must crawl under” (xix). In the first poem of the collection, entitled “Introduction to Poetry,” he describes the difficulties that he encounters when he tries to make students, who were moulded by the system, change their minds about poetry. The title itself implies that the poem attempts a fresh introduction to poetry which differs from the normative definition of the term. The poet begins the poem with “I ask them,” which turns into “I say” and then desperately into “I want them.” To his disappointment, however, near the end of the poem he says:

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.
They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means (5).

Commenting on this poem, Kevin Stein agrees with Collins that students at school are taught to hate poetry. They “learn to approach poems as enemies to be interrogated.” Both teachers and students would “water-board a poem to elicit the meaning encoded beneath the flesh of its lines. Without guilty conscience, both will

kill poem to save themselves and others, if only to rescue everyone from indeterminacy” (188-9). Collins does not intend to slight the efforts of, or show disrespect to teachers “who are caught between students and parents and administrators and test preparation.” Yet, he criticizes this normative method of teaching poetry that “seems to be weighted very heavily on the side of interpretation... So boys and girls often have the natural pleasures of poetry beaten out of them by the time they get out of high school” (Renkl). Collins believes that pleasure is not a byproduct of poetry but rather a constituting element. As an answer to a question about poetry in the interview with *chapter 16*, Collins argues:

It can't really exist as a communicative medium without pleasure. I wrote a dissertation on Wordsworth, so I have an unfair advantage here: Wordsworth mentions pleasure over fifty times. In his essay, “A Preface to Lyrical Ballads,” he just keeps chiming this note of giving pleasure. Indeed, that's why I write it, and that's why I read it (Renkl).

Therefore, taking away the element of pleasure from poetry is to damage it at the core. That is why Collins made it a life-cause as both a teacher and a poet to bring back poetry to a society that has been taught to turn away from it by the educational system.

Instruction has to do with the mind, while pleasure involves the senses and the feelings. Poetry has the unique ability of uniting both instruction and pleasure. To stress one at the expense of the other is to do great injustice to poetry. The Western educational system, as Rosen explains,

focuses on the analytical process that takes place in the left hemisphere of the brain. Poetry, on the other hand, employs both parts, and therefore demands a more “holistic” approach (xv-xvi). There is no denying that poetry, like science, “is first and foremost a cognitive undertaking, one of the most stringent modes of knowing that exist. Everything about it is shaped by the search for insight, or even truth” (31). As Mali says in “Ars Poetica”:

A poem itself is therefore a kind of literate act of discovery.

I'm not saying I understand it. It's a mystery.

Plato was right when he said poetry is nearer vital truth than history.

That's Truth with a capital T. Not the facts, but the Truth as you know it.

That's one of the most appealing aspects there is to being a poet.

(*The Last Time as We Are 17*)

Collins also states that his project “aimed at creating a cognitive dissonance in students who ‘hate poetry’” (xxii). Alice Quinn calls this process “cogitation,” which is a combination of “cognition” and “agitation” (Rosenfeld). Dealing with poetry, therefore, involves intellectual activity. It is important to note, however, that though poetry, like science, involves knowledge, the kind of knowledge that poetry offers is different. “By entering the world of poetry, as Hirshfield argues, “we give ourselves over to a different mode of knowing: to poetry's knowing” (vii). Poetic knowledge, as Folkart explains, involves the senses and the emotions and not just analysis and calculation. It is “*carnal knowledge of the world*. Knowing through sensory inputs of all sorts (as

opposed to categorical perception) is a fundamental way of ‘knowing new’” (41, emphasis in original). Truth in a poem is “irreducible” since it is “a direct outgrowth of its flesh — its imagery, soundplay, rhythms” (31). Meaning in a poem is not just “a bundle of, sharp, disembodied particles of pure meaning.” It is not the “in-one-end-out-the-other” kind of meaning; an abstract notion that pre-existed in the mind of the poet that is meant to be re-constructed in the mind of the reader (34-5). In a poem entitled “The Effort,” Collins criticizes this reductionist approach to poetry. He attacks teachers

... who are fond of asking the question:
 “What is this poet trying to say?”
 as if Thomas Hardy or Emily Dickinson
 had struggled but ultimately failed
 in their efforts -
 inarticulate wretches that they were,
 biting their pens and staring out the
 window for a clue.
 Yes, it seems that Whitman, Amy Lowell
 and the rest could only try and fail,
 but we in Mrs. Parker's third-period
 English class
 here at Springfield High will
 succeed (*Ballistics* 60).

Truth in poetry is not mere rational calculation. As Folkart argues, it is “*made available as direct experience, amplified into directly felt insight*” (32, emphasis in original). As Rosen puts it:

Poetry was created to be experienced in the body and spoken aloud. Made of breath, sound, rhythm, meaning, and silence, a poem is a physical event. It needs a body to give it life. To celebrate a

poem’s natural expression means giving it a life inside your own body – in your own voice, your breathing, and your pulse, not to mention your feelings and thoughts (1).

Poetry is, therefore, meant to be a direct, embodied experience. It is not just about thoughts and ideas. It engages the senses and the feelings as well.

Neuroscience, as Folkart points out, has proved that it is extremely erroneous to divide the rational and the affective into “leak-proof compartments” (31). This is in agreement with the contemporary theory of embodied cognition as formulated by Lakoff and Johnson in their book *Philosophy in The Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (2000). These scientists confirm that as human beings we cannot think without our bodies. They argue against the prevailing Western thought that was mainly influenced by Descartes’s dichotomy of mind and body, assuring that these two can neither be separated nor is it possible to give privilege to one over the other:

Reason is not disembodied, as the tradition has largely held, but arises from the nature of our brains, bodies, and bodily experience... Thus, to understand reason we must understand the details of our visual system, our motor system, and the general mechanisms of neural binding. In summary, reason is not, in any way, a transcendent feature of the universe or of disembodied mind. Instead, it is shaped crucially by the peculiarities of our human bodies (4).

Developmental psychologist, Esther Thelen, also concurs with the claim that cognition is essentially embodied:

To say that cognition is embodied means that it arises from bodily interactions with the world. From this point of view, cognition depends on the kinds of experiences that come from having a body with particular perceptual and motor capacities that are inseparably linked and that together form the matrix within which memory, emotion, language, and all other aspects of life are meshed (1).

These findings have been proved by various scientific experiments. In a research paper entitled “Somatotopic Representation of Action Words in Human Motor and Premotor Cortex,” (2004) Hauk. et al. prove how the earlier theory that the left side of the brain is exclusively responsible for meaning making is erroneous. Using the fMRI has shown how action words such as “lick,” “pick” and “kick,” even when passively read, activate certain motor sections of the brain that are responsible for the motion of the tongue, the hand and the foot respectively. The experiment proves that we need the body to make meaning. We need the senses to make sense. Another interesting experiment was carried out by David Havas in collaboration with a team of psychologists and medical doctors to prove that processing emotive language by the brain is directly affected by the condition of the muscles. The injection of botulinum toxin-A for cosmetic treatment of frown lines in middle-aged women led to a temporary paralysis of the muscle responsible for frowning and consequently affected the cognition of words that indicated anger or sadness, whereas the

feelings of happiness were not hindered. This proves that the body participates in the process of cognition. As Lakoff says, “the very structure of reason itself comes from the details of our embodiment” (4).

In this respect, cognitive science has a lot to learn from “poetic knowing” that depends on direct carnal experience, where the senses are not an impediment to inner sight but rather a gate to a higher knowledge of the self and the world. In his book *Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts* (2003), Patrick C. Hogan gives a detailed account of how the roads of the arts, humanities and cognitive science have diverged. He deems this as the most important discovery of the century, the discovery, so to speak, of the humanity of the human mind (2). As commonsensical as this may appear, rationalist philosophy since Descartes has evidently strayed away from it by arguing for the dichotomy between mind and matter, for the advantage of the former. Hogan even goes to the extreme of saying that if cognitive science fails to consider this crucial part of our everyday lives, then it “will be left on the dustheap of history” (3). This explains why researchers such as Spry have sought to locate their research in the body as an “I witness.” She explains how for her, “academe has always been about speaking from a disembodied head,” and how she finally found emancipation of both her professional self and her personal self in performing autoethnography “and its reliance upon poetic structure to suggest a live participative embodied researcher. Though emotion and poetics constitute scholarly treason, it is heresy put to good use” (“Performing Autoethnography” 706-9).

The theory of embodied cognition had its great impact in many fields, particularly

on education and teaching methodology. Precursors of this experiential and inquiry-based approach to education are the early twentieth-century philosophers John Dewey and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Leitan & Chaffey 3-4). In the present century, educators like Pelias are still calling for a methodology that involves the body and the heart. Pelias calls it “empathic embodiment,” emphasizing the fact that in the end, “what matters is what the heart learns” (29). It is empathic because it helps in understanding the other through a deeper understanding of oneself:

This feeling into another through the body calls upon the cognitive to guide where the heart might go. It is not devoid of consideration. But it insists that what matters most to people is how a “what” might feel. How an idea can turn the stomach, a claim can shut the eyes, or a thought can make the head ache reminds us that the body knows how words feel when they speak (28).

It is now acknowledged that an effective education needs involvement on the part of the students who are no longer regarded as passive recipients of rational knowledge (Leggo 444). Kiefer and Trumpp give an overview of the latest research in the field in their article “Embodiment Theory and Education: The Foundations of Cognition in Perception and Action” (2012).

Billy Collins emphasizes the primacy of the senses in the proper reception of a poem. On Paula Gordon Show, he asserts that “a poem is meant to be vocalized in a way that prose isn’t. It is meant to give the ear pleasure; to be an interruption of silence. He insists that poems should be

preceded and followed by silence because for him, “poetry displaces silence the way a body displaces water.” In his project, he intended the poems to be heard rather than read by the students. A poem, however, does not just appeal to the ear but also to all senses. It is like “a kind of stew, a concoction of various elements blended together in such a way that one cannot easily separate them out again,” just “like a smoothie.” In his poem “Introduction to Poetry,” he says that he asks the students to “take a poem // and hold it up to the light // like a color slide // or press an ear against its hive.” He wants them “to waterski // across the surface of a poem // waving at the author’s name on the shore.” He encourages them to engage their senses to make sense of the poem. Collins gives his poems flesh, or as Resenfeld explains, “he fastidiously organizes and fleshes out the fantastical worlds of his own making.” Sometimes he even makes it appear as though the poems have a life of their own. In his poem “Budapest,” he depicts the poem in the process of creation as though it had a will of its own. The pen, taking the shape of a human hand, moves along the page while the poet watches it “sniffing the paper ceaselessly.” He proceeds,

It wants only to be here tomorrow,
dressed perhaps in the sleeve of a
plaid shirt,
nose pressed against the page,
writing a few more lines

...

while I gaze out the window and
imagine Budapest
or some other city where I have
never been.

(*Sailing Alone* 69)

Collins claims that the poem writes itself out while he just waits for the outcome that appears to him like a new city that he has never seen before. Also in his poem "Poetry," he says that what he likes most about poetry is "The way it enters // Without knocking and is there." Poetry has a presence of its own (*Aimless Love* 43). A poem, therefore, is a living being and not a dead body waiting to be analyzed and torn into parts.

Live Performance on stage has helped Collins in giving his poems life. In his article "Poems on the Page, Poems in the Air," he notes how performance allows the audience to get in direct contact with the moving and breathing figure of the performer rather than the still letters inscribed on the page. He says: "to sit in a room with others and witness a breathing poet saying his or her poem aloud provides a relief from the isolation of print, not to mention more existential feelings of estrangement" (4). He asserts that performance "may even be said to re-establish the authority of authorship in the face of its downsizing by the academic industry" (4). In his book *Close Listening*, Charles Bernstein describes sound as "language's flesh, its opacity as meaning marks its material embeddedness in the world of things" (21). It is "the carnality of language— its material, sensuous embodiment" (22). In the print culture, poetry has become an "activity of isolated individuals writing monological lyrics." Poetry readings, on the other hand bring poetry back to its original role as a "socially responsive," "dialogic" form. Poetry readings in public, Bernstein argues, is in itself a "resistance" to its "reification or commodification" in a culture that privileges the written word (23). Pfeiler agrees that the "literate

Western society, which has been dominated by the written word," tends to forget its indebtedness to oral tradition when poetry used to be "a profoundly social medium, performed in public spaces where people gathered together for common purposes and took part in an intense interplay with the speaker" (14, 22). Bringing poetry back to the public is, therefore, like bringing it home to how it was originally meant to be.

Mali agrees that "performance adds passion to the written word. And passion aids in understanding" (*TeachHub*). It is important, however, to note the difference between Collins and Mali in this respect. Collins reads, whereas Mali performs. Performance poetry, as Pfeiler remarks, is primarily intended for a live audience (15). For Mali, the embodiment of his poems on stage is a crucial part of the meaning conveyed. For example, in certain lines of the poem "What Teachers Make," the meaning is incomprehensible without the gesture, like when he says about his students:

I make them understand that if you
got *this*
then you follow *this*,
and if someone ever tries to judge
you
by what you make, you give them
this.

With the first "this," Mali points to the head, with the second to the heart, and with the third he pounds his fist. Thus, the gesture is an inseparable part of the meaning. Also with the words "what you make," Mali makes the sign for money with his fingers. Non-verbal communication is crucial and not just ornamental. The body is the medium of the meaning. The poem is dressed in flesh and

blood rather than cold inscriptions on a page.

Sound plays a crucial role in performance poetry. As Pfeiler points out, “it is essential to become aware of characteristics of orality... Otherwise we will lack a formal understanding of performance poetry and its skillful patterns of sounds” (15). Among those characteristics are repetition, anaphora and parallelism. In Mali’s poem in question, the word “make” plays a central role. To emphasize the concept of “making,” or “*poesis*,” Mali does not only repeat the word “make” twenty times in this relatively short poem, but also uses a combination of anaphora and parallelism in the structure: subject+verb+object +verb as in the lines:

I make kids wonder,
I make them question.
I make them criticize.
I make them apologize and mean it.
I make them write, write, write,
and then I make them read.
I make them spell...

The technique of the use of short sentences is also enhanced by the tone of voice, the pitch, the volume, and accented articulation. All these qualities which are peculiar to performance form an indispensable part of the message conveyed. The audience also plays an active role in the process. The sound of laughter, applause, and even silence turn the poem into a shared experience. Mali also usually accompanies his performance with a narration of the incidents that gave birth to the poems. This helps the audience to relate to him as a person rather than to a chain of symbols waiting to be decoded by the mind.

When poles meet, the circuit is complete and a sudden outbreak of light takes place. This is the metaphor used by both Collins and Mali to describe the sudden moments of insight that take place when transmitter and receiver, poet and audience, teacher and students meet; when everything suddenly starts to make sense. In such moments, the teacher witnesses “the rare and beautiful bright sparks of cognition in the eyes of a struggling student.” Teachers, Mali explains, call this moment, when something clicks in the mind of a student, a “Lightbulb Moment.” He describes such moments in his poem “I Teach for the Fire”:

I teach for the fire, the moment of
ignition, the spark,
the lightbulb of cognition going on
in the dark
over an adolescent's head. O
beautiful incandescence,
dazzling the dead air all around the
room;
... They say those who seek to
teach
must never cease to learn. I teach
for the moment
everything catches fire and finally
starts to burn”(What Teachers Make
44-45).

These are the moments that recharge the teacher with the power to go on, despite the challenges and frustrations. According to Mali, the process of learning is “like a series of minor and major lightning bolts that strike the brain constantly... Teachers make lightning strike over and over again” (54). These “pedagogical epiphanies,” as Cole and Thossel call them, are moments “when everything seems to come together;” when “one’s knowledge area, the purpose of teaching and learning and student

responses seem to blend and unify" (175). During these priceless moments, "the rupture between teachers and taught is healed and a dialectic, an exchange, takes place which affects not just beliefs but the very heart of the matter of living and experience" (Goodson, 14). This is the joy of teaching, when the teacher is a poet, a maker, an artist who shapes lives anew, revealing to the students the potential that they do not perceive in themselves.

Poetry has this unique ability to touch the essence of something; to "*feel it* directly, and so come to *know it*." As Folkart argues, poetry has this power of "doing the work of the *epiphany-instants* that come to all of us at mercifully rare intervals," when all the data suddenly come together (32-3). In the poem "Introduction to Poetry," Collins describes this process of groping in the dark and searching for a clue, to dropping a mouse "into" the poem and watching him "probe his way out, // or walk inside the poem's room // and feel the walls for a light switch." This, according to Collins, is the way a poem should be handled, that is, from the inside. You enter the world of the poem and feel the walls, looking for a light switch, when suddenly a spark goes off. It is like getting lost in the life of the poem and finally discovering oneself in the process of uncovering the poem. As Collins says in "The Trouble with Poetry" (2007):

But mostly poetry fills me
with the urge to write poetry,
to sit in the dark and wait for a little
flame
to appear at the tip of my pencil.

And along with that, the longing to
steal,
to break into the poems of others

with a flashlight and a ski mask.
(*The Trouble with Poetry* 83)

Entering the experience of the poem is a journey to the light of self-discovery.

To conclude, though human knowledge starts with the senses, it is not limited by them. The human mind, though embodied, has the power to transcend its carnal existence into moments of epiphany, moments of awe and wonder when Truth and Beauty are one. In these moments, the soul achieves a deeper, or rather a higher understanding of its human existence. The bond between body and soul, mind and matter, the rational and the emotional is re-established after it had been breached by reductionist thinking that has made one superior to the other, causing a fracture in the very structure of the human brain, turning the left and the right into warring clans rather than wedded poles without either of which there can never be a current of life. If anything can ever unfailingly unite opposite poles, it is poetry. Poetry has the power to wed thought to feelings, the carnal to the spiritual, and the temporal to the eternal. In harmony with this, Collins and Mali met on stage, rather than page, to give voice to their performing autoethnographic poems about both poetry and teaching. They both believe in the power of poetry in making a difference. They both depend on lived experience rather than mechanical calculations. With this conviction in mind, they both try to restore poetry and teaching to a society that has sadly undermined both.

Notes

- ¹ Most critics refer to "autoethnography" as one word, without a hyphen.

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