Self-Reflexivity and Meta-Poetry in Billy Collins' Selected Poems

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Abstract

Although postmodernism is known for its tendency to deconstruct the basics of existing traditions and conventions pertaining to existing literary forms, among other realms, and though it is commonly associated with self-reflexivity, self-consciousness, self-referentiality and introspective interests, there are numerous examples in the postmodern literary oeuvre of many poets and writers, which prove, whether by fecundity or by frequency, that there is an underlying orientation to establish this self-reflexivity as a new convention, endow it with rules and present it as a post-modernist tradition. In this sense, the apparent postmodernist claim to deconstruct and eradicate the deep-rooted literary conventions implies persisting attempts to develop other conventions based on criticizing, ridiculing and abolishing the former.

This paper aims to prove the assumption given above by means of investigating and analyzing some poems of Billy Collins (1941-) whose main theme and subject matter is self-reflexivity.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Self-Reflexive Poetry, Meta-Poetry, Billy Collins, Self-Conscious Poetry.

1.1 Introduction

Among the most frequent adjectives and catch-phrases associated with postmodernism are self-reflexive, self-referential, self-conscious, etc., which are used almost interchangeably to refer, in a way or another, to the awareness or deliberateness on the part of the poet or writer of the process of composing the literary work. That is why such postmodern theorists as Robert Spires, Patricia Waugh, Michael Boyd and Linda Hutcheon, to name but a few, focused on the aspect of self-consciousness in fictional— particularly metafictional— narratives since the wake of postmodernism in the second half of the twentieth century (Bertens,1995: 3-6). Within the few decades that followed, more attention has been given to this aspect which started to find its way into poetry, drama and cinema as well to the extent that a self-reflexive poem, drama or film is no longer something novel or alien. Therefore, if a novel describing the process of writing the novel itself is called a metfiction, then it is not inconvenient to call a poem about writing the poem a 'meta-poem'; a drama about the process of its own writing a 'meta-drama'; and a film presenting how and why it was produced a 'meta-film.' By and large, literature written about the process of its writing can be safely called 'meta-literature' in the context of postmodernist phraseology. This phenomenon of meta-literature, which is herein used to refer to all types of literary works whose subject matter is the process of their making, is not only a matter of theorizing within the theoretical corpus of postmodernism, such as the above named ones. Rather, it has been established as a common trend in some metaficional novels, dramas and poems. That is to say, it has become a mainstream theme deliberately and repeatedly tackled by postmodern men of letters. In the sections to come, a review of self-reflexivity in theory, along with its definitions and aspects, is given,

followed by a discussion of self-reflexivity in practice, as found in Billy Collins' poetry.

1.2 Self-Reflexivity in Theory

Although self-reflexivity and metapoetry, as literary terms, are relatively new, there are few serious attempts to define and theorize about them. However, entire books on them are scant or almost non-existent, with the exception of few of them which are not comprehensive. In this regard, Eva Muller-Zettelmann (2005) has rightly stated that there has been no full and comprehensive study in English that clarifies "structural conditions of auto-reflexive poetry in any systematic form" (129). Still, from the information collected from various books and articles, it can be stated that metapoetry is "Poetry about poetry, especially self-conscious poems that pun on objects or items associated with writing or creating poetry" (Wheeler 2014). *Self-reflexive* is a term which refers to "literary works that openly reflect upon their own processes of artful composition. Such self-referentiality is frequently found in modern works of fiction that repeatedly refer to their own fictional status" (*Oxford Reference*). As for self-reflexivity, it is that kind of writing which refers to itself, and this is common in postmodern writing since it is "especially fond of this artistic technique" as L.K. Wheeler suggests, employing it in metafiction and metapoetry (Wheeler 2014).

In a very important essay entitled "Toward a Definition of Self-Reflexive Poetry" Alfred Weber (1997) presents a survey of many aspects related to what he calls the 'genre' of self-reflexive poetry. According to him, this genre

> denotes the poem's treatment of at least one aspect of the author's theory, or poetics, as its primary and overt thematic concern. This thematic genre includes all poems that deal with *the poet* (his position and function in the

culture and society of his time), with *the writing of poetry* (the creative process and the problems of language), and/or with *the poem* (the work of art, its structure and its quality). That is, all self-reflexive poems have as their dominant subject and central theme any aspect of the poet's poetics. (10) [emphasis added]

Hence, any poem that deals with one, or more, of these aspects is a self-reflexive poem. This has its origins in Western poetry since Horace's *Ars Poetica*-- a poem in which he gave several advices to poets and writers on the art of poetry and drama. Later, this phrase of *ars poetica* has been naturalized into English, to designate a coherent and systematic set of poetics, and poetics, in turn, is "a systematic theory or doctrine of poetry" as Alex Preminger defines it (qtd. in Weber 1997, 10). So, a poem which has as its subject matter or theme any aspect of the process of writing, or presents the poet's concern with any problem related to the process *per se* is a self-reflexive one. In brief, a poem whose dominant theme is poetics is self-reflexive. In this sense, the basic denominator or criteria for the identification of self-reflexive poem is the availability of poetics as its basic theme.

However, this engagement with poetics is not clearly defined since there are many aspects involved in it. That is why Weber specifies the things associated with poetics being the milestone of self-reflexivity as follows:

> In our specific context, it also means the overall view of the aims, norms and problems of his art held by one poet, developed out of, and along with his poetic practice, related to the demands and conventions of his time, and if he is a literary critic and theorist himself, at least partly articulated in the discursive prose of his essays, prefaces, reviews, or letters. (10-11)

This outline of the system of self-reflexivity assumes that the concern of the poet with the artistic and literary theme of creative writing is not necessarily exclusively expressed in his poems. Such poetic and

literary views can be explicitly found in the poet's discursive writings, speeches, and interviews, as in the case of Billy Collins whose poetry is the concern of this study, and whose TV interviews, lectures and written articles are significant sources for having a better understanding of his poetic beliefs.

However, there are some assumptions that can be posed that all poetry must necessarily be concerned with, and reflexive of, the art of poetry. In this regard, Dorothy Z. Baker (1997) argues that "every image, every metrical unit, every rhyme scheme, and every stanzaic form is 'loaded'"(1). Hence, when a poet evokes an image, or writes according to a specific poetic form, he/she is writing out of a tradition, a literary past that extends to hundreds of years, and reflecting on the legacy of that past (Baker,1). But when a poem confronts the poetic tradition, Baker believes, and reflects upon it, this does not make it a reflexive poem. There is also a category of poems that are extraordinarily indulged in the peculiar aspects and details of poetics to the extent that they have no other issue raised in them but that of the aesthetics of poetry. In other words, such poems tackle the poetic concerns as a primary—and sometimes a sole—concern in the entire poem, not as minor by-product. This latter category is the self-reflexive proper.

More to the point, Anna Balakian discusses the 'self' which modifies the word 'reflexive' in the term, implying that it refers not to the poet's self, but to the poems' self. In this sense, she differentiates between the self-reflexive and self-expressive poem:

> My particular definition of the independent or self-reflexive poem is limited to the reflection of the self, with the *self* meaning the poem rather than the poet. If indeed it should mean otherwise, that is the reflection of the poet on his poems, I would call it self-expressive rather than self-reflexive" (Balakian, 300).

Also, this lyric mode of self-reflexivity is restricted to the poems which present aesthetic and structural issues and bring them to the table, not to confine themselves to the presentation of their *zeitgeist* (Balakian, 300). That is to say, the prerequisite of a self-reflexive poem is that it focuses not on the contextual issues, but on its introspective textual issues. Besides its reference to its own aesthetic details and its fictionality, self-reflexive poetry, or metapoetry, is defined by one or more of the following aspects listed by Eva Muller-Zettelmann for its themes:

> its reference to aesthetic objects, determined by its fictionality. Metalyric poems refer to lyric inspiration, to the poetic creative process, to the social task of literary creation, or to the intended reader's reception. The list of possible meta-themes could be extended further, but their semantic common denominator is in their reference to some aspect of the fictionality of the lyric work of art (132).

The above-cited list highlights the role of the reader as another basic component of self-reflexive poetry. In this type of poetry, the reader is not a mere passive receiver of what is being conveyed to him by the poet. Rather, s/he is a major player who may participate in the meaning, interact with the poet, who in turn, assumes that the reader is equipped with sufficient intellectual background to grasp the message of the poem. Also, as with all postmodernist writings, self-reflexive poetry largely relies on the supposition that the reader is well-versed in the literary traditions, and is familiar with what the self-reflexive poem, as an exclusively poetic issue, is about. In other words, the recipient of this kind of poetry must be aware of the poetic tradition tackled in the poem and its components: form, theme, speaker, figures of speech, diction, etc., otherwise, the poet would miss the point and be unable to establish any communication with his/her readers or listeners.

This later point is crucially important in the context of discussing the poetry of Billy Collins, simply because he managed, mostly through self-reflexive poetry which constitutes the biggest proportion of his poetic works, to appeal to millions of readers in the US, to become the most popular living poet in his country. The videos of his poetry-reading events show thousands of people gathering in the audience, interacting with him by their continuous applause or their frequent laughter as he makes some humorous and cynical remarks on purely self-reflexive poems. This leads to the conclusion that the success of self-reflexive poetry depends largely on its recipients without whose understanding, self-reflexive poetry would not present itself as a persistent poetic genre.

1.3 Self-Reflexive Poetry in Practice

It may suffice here to state that Billy Collins, a US former poet laureate (2001-2003), is considered "one of the world's greatest living poets" and one of the best in history (Gustavson, 2009). In a *New York Times* article, Bruce Weber described him as "the most popular poet in America" (Weber, 1999) whereas *The Washington Post* described him as the American "bard of simple things" (28 Nov.2001). He enjoys such a large appeal on the popular and literary circles of the United States to an extent that placed him among the most famous celebrities, and deemed him an "American phenomenon" asserting that " No poet since Robert Frost has managed to combine high critical acclaim with such broad popular appeal" ("Billy Collins", *Smith College Poetry Center*, 2002). His fame, which no other poet enjoyed during his/her lifetime, rests on his ten published poem collections of which some have broken sales records for poetry and earned him millions of dollars, as his publishers confirmed (Whitney, 2004). Due to this, his poetry reading sessions are always crowded with audience whether they were indoors or outdoors to

such an extent that they are always standing rooms only, refuting the assumption that in the postmodern age, an American superstar or icon cannot be a poet.

Not far from his popular appeal, Collins enjoyed good reception among critics and reviewers, whether for each of his books of poetry, or for his entire career in which he proved to be a major prize-winner, a poet-laureate, and a New York Literary Lion (*Poetry Foundation*, 2014). Among the most frequently quoted reviews Collins received are those of John Updike, John Taylor and John Deming, among others. Updike stated that "Billy Collins writes lovely poems . . . limpid, gently startling, more serious than they seem, they describe all the worlds that are and were and some others besides" (qtd. Plimpton, 2001). But Taylor recognized the different layers of meaning to be found in a Collins poem, which is apparently humorous and transparent, still deep and far-reaching, helping us feel "the mystery of being alive," stating that: "Rarely has anyone written poems that appear so transparent on the surface yet become so ambiguous, thought-provoking, or simply wise once the reader has peered into the depths" (qtd. *Poetry Foundation*, 2014). Whereas John Deming highlighted Collins' awareness of his craftsmanship and his concern for his readers, stating that "the transmission of poem to head takes place always elsewhere and in silence, in the mysterious space where poems live…Collins lets us access this place with alarming graciousness, and the openness of his voice probably helps account for his popularity" (qtd. *Poetry Foundation*, 2014).

Collins always combines self-reflexivity of poetry with a sharp touch of humor which never fails to arouse laughter among his readers and/or listeners. This combination marks his style which is rather ironic, sarcastic and cynical, a style described by Erik Martiny as a tongue-in-

cheek style (xxii). Also, for reasons related to the sense of humor that looms large over his poetry, Collins is labeled as "the class clown in the schoolhouse of American poetry" (Whitney, 2004). It is also worth stating that Collins' academic study— he has M.A. and Ph.D. in English poetry, and a thesis on the poetry of Coleridge and Wordsworth— and teaching of poetry for many decades at Columbia University, Sarah Lawrence, and Lehman College, City University of New York (*Poetry Foundation*, 2014), made him well-steeped in all issues, mysteries and details of the poetry writing process, whether those of forms, themes and genres so to ridicule and satirize them in such a peculiar way upon which most of the aforementioned acclaim is established. This concern with poetry and its issues reveals itself not only in Collins' poems as predominant subject matter, his discursive prose writings and oral conversations, interviews and presentations mainly focus on the same. The several press, TV and video interviews with him show that the process of poetic creation and its relevant matters occupy the center of his concern. In this regard, the present study shall highlight some of the comments and statements he made in these interviews, as far as they are relevant to the poems to be discussed below.

One of the clearest examples of Collins' self-reflexive poems is "Sonnet," published in *Sailing Alone around the Room: New and Selected Poems* (2001), in which he exploits the renaissance poetic form of the sonnet and the conventions related to sonnet writing as a subject of ridicule and mockery:

> All we need is fourteen lines, well, thirteen now,
> And after this next one just a dozen
> To launch a little ship on love's storm-tossed seas,
> then only ten more left like rows of beans. (1-4)

Starting his poem as such, Collins clarifies from the outset that his intention is not to write a sonnet proper, as the poem's title may indicate. Rather, the gives sarcastic instructions on how to write a sonnet. Given the fact that the sonnet, as a closed form of poetry, has to be limited to fourteen lines only, and that its Italian or Petrarchan type is divided into an octave and a sestet which must follow a specific meter and rhyme scheme, Collins here works on these details as a subject matter of his poem. This poem is self-reflexive in the sense of the full awareness which is revealed in the countdown of the lines of the sonnet which is used by Collins. With each of the above-cited lines, Collins refers to the number of lines left to finish the task of writing a sonnet: fourteen, then thirteen – since the first line is already done, then a dozen, and after writing the fourth line, he tells us that only "ten more left" before all is over. Therefore, we should make haste and launch "little ships" in the stormy seas of love, in an open reference to the Elizabethan tradition of using the image of the ship sailing in the roaring seas of passion, commonly used in courtly love sonnets.

In addition to the line-number issue, and the unrequited love being a common subject among Elizabethan sonneteers, Collins also alludes to the cliché images and the iambic pentameter employed in sonnets:

> How easily it goes unless you get Elizabethan
> and insist the iambic bongos must be played
> and rhymes positioned at the ends of lines,
> one for every station of the cross. (5-8)

It is an easy task to write a sonnet unless the poet insists on being so Elizabethan in matters of rhymes and meters. Here it must be said that Collins' poem does not follow a rhyme-scheme, neither cares he for the flow of unstressed syllable, followed by a stressed one as the iambic

meter requires. His successive lines, though seemingly having a unified length, do not intend to be rhythmical and rhymed, and the fact that he made each of the above-quoted stanzas running on each other without any stop seems to be a parody of the common practice of English Elizabethan sonneteers of using run-on lines more than end-stopped ones.

Now that the "octave" of Collins' "Sonnet" is over, there must be a 'turn' or 'volta' to indicate the transition from the first part of the sonnet – which usually states the problem—to the sestet which presents a resolution for that problem, as the sonnet convention has it. This turn is traditionally expressed by such words as 'but, yet, then, and …etc. Collins would not miss this point in presenting his own sestet as follows:

But hang on here while we make the turn
into the final six where all will be resolved,
where longing and heartache will find an end,
where Laura will tell Petrarch to put down his pen,
take off those crazy medieval tights,
blow out the lights, and come at last to bed. (9-14)

With the 'turn', Collins makes explicit and implicit references to the turn the sonnet form requires. He uses 'but' and states that "we make the turn" in the last six (lines) in part of his counting process of the fourteen lines he started with. Here, Collins explains, everything must be resolved, the longing, the passion and sentimental begging typical of courtly love practitioners. But this resolution is very humorous, as the Laura of the Petrarchan tradition is not that unattainable lady, she is just the opposite of that, as she is already sleeping in bed, begging her 'Petrarch' to stop all this; to put down his pen; to leave these rigid constraints of the sonnet form which are 'crazy'; to switch-off the lights and join her in bed. Todd Nathan Thompson states in "Parnassus in Pillory: Satirical Verse" that

Collins follows in this poem a dialectic of respect and burlesque as he "self-consciously mocks the form's conventions while performing them" (481). Thompson adds that Collins employment of the "informal, historically naïve feel of "crazy" and the poem's irregular meter and rhyme situate the speaker as a playfully colloquial commentator on the sonnet rather than a sneering, perfectionist practitioner" (418).

Still in the context of self-reflexivity of the sonnet form, there is another poem in which Collins uses the sonnet as a subject-matter. It is less overtly dependant on the structure of sonnets for its own development than the previous poem. The poem is entitled "American Sonnet," also published in *Sailing Alone Around the Room: New and Selected Poems* (2001). It is written as a response to some British argument about American poetry, and as an assertion of Collins' Americanism and his consciousness of the American traditions as opposed to the British English ones. Collins wrote in an article entitled "What's American About American Poetry?" (2001) that he has never considered himself a particularly American poet until he visited England to make some readings. Then, he became conscious of his typically American style which is grounded on American idioms, peculiarities and tendencies which are different from the British ones. He continued that:

> If a writer is the sum of his or her influences, then my own poems are unavoidably the result of my exposure to the sounds and styles of both British and American poetry. I even find myself playing one diction off against another, usually for ironic effect. But more specifically, in thinking about myself as an "American poet," and thus committing the dangerous act of auto-literary criticism, I find that a number of my poems seem determined to establish an American rootedness distinct from European influence. (Collins, *What is American?*)

If in "Sonnet," Collins mocks the Petrarchan sonnet tradition using the same number of lines and structure of the sonnet, in "American Sonnet" he departs from both to write seven free-verse stanzas, each consisting of three lines, without any particular rhyme-scheme. He starts this poem with an open statement in which he declares the aim of the poem: "We do not speak like Petrarch or wear a hat like Spenser / and it is not fourteen lines / like furrows in a small, carefully plowed field" (1-3). Again, references to specific details of sonnet-writing, and names of Renaissance poets like Petrarch and Spenser, are employed in this self-reflexive poem which describes the restriction and rigidity of the form as a quaint and a small field which must be very carefully plowed. This image is completely opposite to the open and far-stretching lands of America which are too grand to be restricted, and which afford some liberty to be given to those who plow them. Through this field-plowing metaphor, Collins expresses his preference of the American way of writing over the confining European form of poetry. He states that this poem

> is a rejection of the Italian and English sonnet models in favor of the American postcard which, like the sonnet, limits expression to a confined space and, in addition, combines the verbal on one side with the pictorial on the other. Like the traditional love sonnet, the traveler's postcard has acquired its own ritualized conventions. (Collins, *What is American?*)

Instead of following the models of Petrarch and Spenser, whether in speaking, dressing or poetry-writing, American poets—whose spokesperson here is Collins—prefer their own model; a model which is created by themselves to cope with their spirit. In poetry, they rather prefer:

the picture postcard, a poem on vacation,
that forces us to sing our songs in little rooms
or pour our sentiments into measuring cups. (4-6)

Postmodern American poets no longer find in the traditional European examples some models to be emulated. If they happen to write short and restricted poems, it is only in postcards written in a travelers' haste as s/he stops for rest at any station or airport to write a few words to the loved ones. Elsewhere, they would not sing their songs "in little rooms." Their sentiments are too large to be poured and measured in little cups. As for what they write on the back side of postcard pictures, it is very natural and everyday-like, without that carefully selected archaic diction. Collins says:

We locate an adjective for weather.
We announce that we are having a wonderful time.
We express the wish that you were here

and hide the wish that we were where you are,
walking back from the mailbox, your head lowered
as you read and turn the thin message in your hands. (10-15)

Here, the separation between the poet-lovers and their loved ones is not expressed in the tragic tone of Elizabethan poets. It is expressed in a matter of fact style which implies a very touching wish that they were together, the traveler wishes to be where his addressed loved one was, watching her as she picks the postcard from the mail box, as she looks down to read the written words of the message. However, this little touch of sentiment gives way to Collins' usual sarcasm, as he immediately gets back to sensual reality, with a series of snapshots from the place where the traveler-poet is:

A slice of this faraway place, a width of white beach,
a piazza or carved spires of a cathedral
will pierce the familiar place where you remain,

and you will toss on the table this reversible display;
a few square inches of where we have strayed
and a compression of what we feel. (16-21)

Another self-reflexive poem from *Sailing Alone Around the Room* (2001) is "Madmen" in which Collins also tackles the process of writing poetry. In this poem, he starts with a common superstition that when you speak of a project before it is done, it with not be done, and this is true of a poem: "They say you can jinx a poem / if you talk about it before it is done./ If you let it out too early, they warn, / your poem will fly away" (1-4). Collins states that this is completely true, and relates as a proof what happened with him once:

Take the night I mentioned to you
I wanted to write about the madmen,
as the newspapers so blithely call them,
who attack art, not in reviews,
but with breadknives and hammers
in the quiet museums of Prague and Amsterdam. (6-11)

This project of a poem flies away and is not accomplished. "Madmen" has its setting at an inn where the poet is addressing his drinking mate. Collins reports the latter having said that those are "the real artists" whose "brush" is the "screwdriver" and "The real vandals are the restorers" (14). This speech has bewildered him as he was thinking of his poem about those madmen, and caused him to reconsider the roles of the doctors (the psychiatrists) and the madmen (the artists) in such a confusing way which requires careful examination by the reader: "the ones in the white doctors' smocks / who close the wound in the landscape, / and thus ruin the true art of the mad" (16-18). This "impossibly intractable stance", in the words

of Marilyn Bates and John Schulman (Review, 2001) presents the doctors who are supposed to patch the 'wounds' left by the attackers on the painted landscapes of the madmen's art as being destroyers of true art. Metaphorically speaking, the real destroyers of art are the critics who are supposed to be its protectors. If this interpretation proves to be accurate, then the madmen are the artists who are always misunderstood, dis-appreciated, and sometimes ruthlessly attacked by critics. In the midst of this puzzle, Collins returns back to the poem he intended to write, only to watch it "flying down to the front / of the bar and hover there / until the next customer walked in" (19-21). The reader is left uncertain whether the argument between the two persons was real, or it is only some blathering and delusions of a drunken poet, and whether the poem Collins spoke about at the beginning was finally written, being the same one which reflects upon the poetic creation and given the title "Madmen", or it was really jinxed. Collins concluded the poem with a hope that, having missed the inspiration and lost the poem (the bird) he was about to write in the bar, he still has the hope of finding inspiration in the way home in a road sign, a street lamp, or any other simple thing:

> but that night, I drove home alone
> with nothing swinging in the cage of my heart
> except the faint hope that I might
> catch glimpse of the thing
> in the fan of my headlights,
> maybe perched on a road sign or a street lamp,
> poor unwritten bird…. (29-35)

In a similar self-reflexive poem entitled "The Trouble With Poetry," the title poem of a collection of poems published in 2005, Collins also reflects on poetry and its composition. "The Trouble With Poetry" starts with a while of pondering on what is the trouble with poetry, then reaching a conclusion that "the trouble with poetry is / that it

encourages the writing of more poetry" (5-6). According to Collins, "poetry is inspired by other poetry. Your voice as a poet has an external source" (Skibell, 2012), so a poet needs a wide range of influences, or readings of poetry of others, in order to write poetry, that is why it is very important for writers and poets to be well-versed in as many styles of other poets and writers as possible till they become organic components of his own style, and not easily discovered as not his own (ibid). This view of Collins is frequently repeated and emphasized in his interviews and prose writings. But in the poem under discussion, he wrote this view in verse:

> Poetry fills me with joy
> and I rise like a feather in the wind.
> Poetry fills me with sorrow
> and I sink like a chain flung from a bridge.
>
> 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 ski mask. (17-27)

For Collins, poetry is an agent which reconciles the otherwise irreconcilable antitheses: joy and sorrow, a feather and a chain, the heights and depths. Moreover, he unravels in these lines some of the mysteries of the process of creative writing and its requirements.

The aspects of poeticism discussed in the poems above, where Collins tackles the form and the first instigators of poetry-writing process, are not the only ones in his concern for the art of poetry. He also exploits, with apparent sarcasm, the poetic diction and the practice of repeating

words for emphasis. In "After the Funeral" (published in *Aimless Love*, 2013), he addresses this linguistic matter which is taking over in the everyday speech as well as in poetry, according to him. In this poem, he tells of a casual chatting with a friend, again in a bar, in which they speak of the funeral of a friend named Tom. Collins' addressee, sentimental and heartbroken for the loss, keeps using the technique of repeating the same word twice in hyphenated pairs, using the first as an adjective to modify the second. Collins' keen ear and sarcastic mood never missed this matter however emotional the situation may have been:

> When you told me you needed a *drink*-drink
> and not a drink of water,
> I steered you by the elbow into a corner bar,
> which turned out to be a real *bar*-bar. (1-4) [emphasis original]

There, they agreed that "the funeral / was a real *funeral*-funeral" (6-7), and that "Tom is a real *friend*-friend" as the addressee said, lifting his "*drink*-drink" (9-10). In the funeral, they continued, "Angela's black dress/ was elegant but not like *elegant*-elegant" (13-14). They concluded their sitting with a praise for the bartender "who was more than a bartender. / A true *bartender*-bartender was what he was / we decided, with a respectful *clink*-clink / of our *drink*-drinks" (19-22) [emphasis original].

Such examples of poems reflecting on the poetic diction are numerous in Collins' poetry. Another aspect on which Collins focuses his attention on his metapoetic poems is that of using clichés of outdated metaphors, recalling those used by poets centuries ago, which are seldom relevant to postmodern life. In "Litany" (published in his *Nine Horses*, 2002), he starts with two lines from a poem by Jacques Crickillon, a French poet whose metaphors do not appeal to Collins as it seems.

Therefore, he built an entire poem mocking these archaic metaphors. Collins cited the former's two lines addressed to his love as an epigraph: "You are the bread and the knife, / The crystal goblet and the wine..." Then he starts a series of very commonplace metaphors used by poets throughout ages to describe their loves. In this regard, Collins states in a TV show (in April 7, 2008) that this poem is

> stealing something from another poet. . . I take the first two lines of someone else's poem and rewrite it for him. . . When you see a poem that seems to fail, you can just re-write it and improve it that way. So this is how I came across a love poem in a magazine and it is a series of comparisons in which the poet relies on a very ancient device in Western love poetry, at least standing back to Middle Ages, which is to compare the beloved to various things in the world, all flattering her, so 'your eyes are like stars'….etc. (City Arts& Lectures, Fora TV)

Collins here exploits his accumulated knowledge of the poetry of other poets resulting from decades of teaching poetry, images, similes and metaphors to college students. He enumerated several of the most common ones which recall Crickillon's, and gave them a very suggestive title; "Litany" in its second, rather than the first dictionary meaning, i.e., a tedious recital or repetitive series:

> You are the bread and the knife,
> the crystal goblet and the wine.
> You are the dew on the morning grass
> and the burning wheel of the sun. (1-4)

He juxtaposes some comic metaphors with the cliché ones to create a sharp satirical effect. After working out the two lines of the epigraph in the above-cited stanza, he adds "You are the white apron of the baker, / and the marsh birds suddenly in flight" (5-6). Being a baker's white apron – a very down-to-earth metaphor—demolishes the effect created by the previous metaphors of the dew on the morning grass, and the burning

wheel of the sun. Then Collins, in a direct and conversational sarcastic style, marked by understatement, tells the addressee that:

> However, you are not the wind in the orchard,
> the plums on the counter,
> or the house of cards.
> And you are certainly not the pine-scented air.
> There is just no way that you are the pine-scented air. (7-11)

Such sudden shifts from a high-sounding tone to sarcastic understatements is typical of Billy Collins whose sharp and humorous remarks rely mostly on his ability to start in a specific tone and end up in another. About this practice, he said in a conversation with Ginger Murchison (2013): "I like poems that start with some familiar situation and through some verbal or imaginative activity, get one to a completely different place" (Murchison 2013). This statement is particularly true to "Litany" which goes on ridiculing the conventional metaphors of his fellow poets:

> It is possible that you are the fish under the bridge,
> maybe even the pigeon on the general's head,
> but you are not even close
> to being the field of cornflowers at dusk. (12-15)

An openly self-reflexive reference to the poetic imagery comes just in the midst of Collins sarcastic treatment of this issue of poeticism. Collins tells his addressee, who seems to be the poet of the epigraph, about what he thinks about himself, still in the same humorous tone: "It might interest you to know, / speaking of the plentiful imagery of the world, / that I am the sound of rain on the roof" (19-21).Then he presents himself through a series of images and metaphors in an interplay of conventional aesthetic ones along with sarcastic humorous ones, but he exempted himself from being the "bread and the knife" of the outset of the poem:

I also happen to be the shooting star,
the evening paper blowing down an alley
and the basket of chestnuts on the kitchen table.
I am also the moon in the trees
and the blind woman's tea cup.
But don't worry, I'm not the bread and the knife.
You are still the bread and the knife.
You will always be the bread and the knife,
not to mention the crystal goblet and--somehow--the wine. (22-30)

This issue of inspiration of poetry has received much attention and concern from Billy Collins. He always says that reading the poetry of others is very useful for a poet to help him start his own poems. He wrote poems depending on other poets' works, some of them are discussed above, but dozens of them are not due to the limitation of this paper. Among the titles of Collins poems which re-work, emulate or parody some poems of other poets, or allude to the names, lives, or title of other poets, are "Lines Composed Over Three Thousand Miles from Tintern Abbey" (1998), "Musée des Beaux Arts Revisited," (1998), "Monday Morning,"(1998)—which exploits Wallace Steven's "Sunday Morning", "Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes" (2000), "Poetry" (2002), "The Literary Life" (2002), "Envoy" (2008), "Memorizing 'The Sun Rising' by John Donne" (2011), "Ode to a Desk Lamp" (2013), "Unholy Sonnet" (2013), "Biographical Notes in an Anthology of Haiku" (2013), "Lines Written at Flying Point Beach" (2013), "Lines Written in a Garden by a Cottage in Herefordshire" (2013), "Keats: or How I Got My Negative Capability Back" (2013).

In addition to the inspiration coming from such literary figures and icons of the past who are often approached in Collins' "quirky, funny, touching, contemplative poems" but with no reverential attitude (Mairesse, N.D.), there is poetic inspiration in the immediate

surroundings, as the sources of inspiration mentioned in "Madmen" – discussed above—and in the little ordinary things that pass unnoticed in everyday life. In this regard, Collins has a funny short poem titled "Suggestion Box" (published in *Aimless Love* 2013) in which he ridicules the common practice in which people suggest to poets some subjects to write poems about. Collins gives in this poem an account of one day in his ordinary life, starting in the early morning in the coffee shop, when the "usual waitress said / I'll bet you're going to write a poem about this / after she had knocked a cup of coffee into my lap" (3-5). Later in the morning, a student told him he should write a poem about "the fire drill that was going on / as we all stood on the lawn outside our building" (8-9). Then "In the afternoon a woman I barely knew / said you could write a poem about that, / pointing to a dirigible that was passing overhead" (10-12). Collins goes on to say that, after all this, "a friend turned to me as we walked past / a man whose face was covered with tattoos / and said I see a poem coming!" (14-16). These suggestions made him wonder: "Why is everyone being so helpful?" (18). The question is not only an implied dissatisfaction and annoyance by such interventions on what a poet must or must not write about, it also indicates Collins' sharp eye for the public taste for poetry, and what particular subjects they think suitable for poetry. However, he would be more appreciative if they mind their own business and let him mind his own: "May be I should write a poem / about all the people who think / they know what I should be writing about" (20-22), and this is what he did actually in the poem under discussion, which he called "The Suggestion Box".

According to Alfred Weber and Eva Muller-Zettelmann, who are both quoted in the introduction given above, self-reflexivity in poetry arises from a conscious poetic mentality which is fully aware of the

specific elements of poetry and poeticism, including the poet, the poem, the process of writing, the social task, inspiration, the poetic techniques, images…etc. All these are evidently present in Billy Collins' poetry in addition to his concern about the reader's reception, and his views on studying and teaching poetry, and how a poem should be taught. In his "Introduction to Poetry" and "The Effort" (published in *The Trouble With Poetry, 2005*) among other poems, he objects to forcing a meaning on a poem, and ridicules the question often raised by poetry teacher about "what is the poet trying to say?" (The Effort, l. 4).

In this sense, self-reflexive poems of Billy Collins do not come randomly or occasionally in the bulk of the ten books of poetry he published so far. There is a "systematic theory or doctrine" of self-reflexivity – to re-quote Alex Preminger's phrase which is quoted above. Collins has an integrated and comprehensive doctrine of self-reflexivity which has become a tradition for himself, as it is for some other postmodernists.

However, Collins' poetry, though apparently light, humorous and sarcastic, implies some deep, multidimensional and serious concerns which are not devoid of pain. In this regard, Michelle Mairesse observed that Collins is "a serious entertainer who laughs on the outside and cries on the inside while suggesting that the outside may be the inside after all, that the relation between Word and World is a mystery"(Mairesse N.D.). Also, the overt self-reflexivity that characterizes the biggest proportion of his poetry implies a need to find a new order or a shape for the postmodern poetics which requires a departure from the outworn traditions and conventions. Yet, this departure must not lead to chaos, in a

manner of change for the sake of change. Rather, it is an attempt to replace the rigid formality by a new fresh and flexible one.

Therefore, in Collins' poetry, there is a soft form and shape which governs his poems and makes them relevant to life despite their excessive self-referentiality. Postmodernist theory asserts the introspective rather than the outer concern of literary texts, i.e., a literary work should speculate on its own process of coming together, not on the subjective and humanistic modes of expression. It must reveal the interiorities of themselves, not those of poets and writers. A good poem, Collins said once, "is just a path to its ending, the poem is the only way to access its own ending. That view of poetry, I think, is much closer to the actual compositional mood that poets got in mind than the classroom question of what the poem means"(Murchison, 2013). But a careful reading of his poetry shows that this "path" is not passing through a vacuum, it passes through real and factual life, real men and women with joys and sorrows, and it is not difficult to feel them in Collins' poem, simply because he is very conscious of his readers and their cares, aspirations and practices. Therefore, it might be concluded that Collins' self-reflexive poetry transcends the limits and regulations emphasized by postmodernists as it engages some external concerns of life along with, and in the context of, the introspectiveness of the self-reflexivity.

The Self-reflexivity of Collins' poetry does not cut him from the contextual reality which surrounds him or make his poems isolated and irrelevant. From the very act of dismantling the poetic and literary traditions and conventions of the past in Collins poems, there arises a new set of techniques and conventions which aim at creating a type of poetry that is more real, more capable of rendering the social and cultural life of the postmodernist age, with all its dynamism, pluralism and complexity.

In the midst of the crises and mess of life in the age of globalization, art remains a path towards order. Billy Collins' doctrine of self-reflexivity is not merely intended to ridicule, deconstruct and eradicate the conventions of the past. It is a 'systematic doctrine' in the sense that it has as its objective finding new conventions closer to postmodernist life, and maintaining the useful ones inherited from the past. To him, "life is a mess and art is form" (Murchison, 2013), and poetry is one of the basic arts which could add form, order and structure to the fragile reality of the postmodern world.

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انعكاس الذات وما وراء الشعر في قصائد مختارة من بيلي كولنز

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مستخلص:

على الرغم مما عرف عن ما بعد الحداثة من نزعة نحو تفكيك أسس التقاليد والأعراف المتعلقة بالأجناس الأدبية المتوارثة، من بين نزعاتها الأخرى، ورغم اقترانها الواسع بالميل نحو الانعكاس الذاتي، والوعي الذاتي، واستبطان الأدب، إلا أنه هنالك أمثلة عديدة من المنتج الأدبي ما بعد الحداثي للعديد من الشعراء والأدباء تثبت، سواء من خلال غزارتها أو حضورها المتكرر، وجود نزعة مضمرة لتأسيس هذه السمة الانعكاسية في الأعمال الأدبية بوصفها تقليدا أو عرفا بديلا، وذلك من خلال منحها – أي السمة المذكورة— قواعد وأسس، وتقديمها على أنها تقليدا أو عرفا لما بعد الحداثة. وهكذا، فإن المزاعم الذي سوقتها ما بعد الحداثة بإنها جاءت لتفكك عرى التقاليد المتجذرة وتقتلعها لتحرر الأدب من القيود إنما هي في واقع الحال تتضمن محاولات تترى لإعداد تقاليد وأعراف أخرى تعتمد انتقاد التقاليد الأولى، ومهاجمتها والغائها.

تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى إثبات ما تقدم من خلال تقصي وتحليل بعض قصائد الشاعر الأمريكي بيلي كولنز (١٩٤١-) الذي اعتمد الانعكاسية الذاتية للقصيدة موضوعة رئيسة لمعظم أشعاره.

كلمات البحث: ما بعد الحداثة، الشعر الانعكاسي، ما وراء الشعر، بيلي كولنز، الشعر الامريكي.