

Lessons on Poetry in the Works of American Poet Billy Collins

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*My goal in life is to unite my avocation with my vocation, As my two eyes
make one in sight.*

—Robert Frost

The American poet Billy Collins (1941), who served two terms as the US Poet Laureate from 2001-2003 was once called the “most popular poet in America” by Bruce Weber in the *New York Times*.¹ Indeed, it is rare for poets to achieve national recognition, but each generation has a poet that supersedes the boundaries of academia or communities of poets. Collins reigns supreme, having published twelve poetry collections, two anthologies and continues to produce sold-out public poetry readings. According to his biographical introduction from the Poetry Foundation, Collins “has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the New York Foundation for the Arts and has taught at Columbia University, Sarah Lawrence, and Lehman College, and the City University of New York, where he is a Distinguished Professor. He is also Senior Distinguished Fellow of the Winter Park Institute in Florida, and a faculty member at the State University of New York-Stonybrook.”²

Collins has reached a degree of national and international fame in much of the same way Robert Frost, or W. H. Auden had a century earlier. Although Collins shares little in terms of poetic disposition with either of these poets, Collins does share their drive to make poetry accessible to everyone—to take poetry out of the cloistered

1 “Billy Collins,” Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/billy-collins>

2 Ibid.

towers of academia to bring it to the public. For example, here is Frost in a 1915 letter to Sidney Cox, “Nothing good can come from the present ways of the professionally literary in American universities.... Everything is research for the sake of erudition.”³ This sentiment again surfaced in 1954, speaking at Bread Loaf, when Robert Frost lamented the direr circumstance facing students of poetry. [Scholars have] “reduced poetry to an esoteric puzzle, an intellectual game of identifications.”⁴ It might be ironic that Collins has garnered a reputation of a casual, witty poet after earning his PhD in Romantic poetry. However, Collins is conscious of the readers engagement with poetry. In a review of Collins’s work, John Deming remarks that “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.”⁵ For Collins, the act of reading is both private and public. Moreover, he has done much for the dissemination of poetry to the public by starting the *Poetry 180 Project* through the Library of Congress when Collins was acting US Poet Laureate. This project aims to instill poetry at the high school level by introducing students to a poem a day. According to Collins on the project’s homepage, “Poetry can and should be an important part of our daily lives. Poems 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. *Poetry 180* is designed to make it easy for students to hear or read a poem on each of the 180 days of the school year.”⁶

Billy Collins’s poetry journeys readers through ordinary American experiences with light-handed humor that engage readers with colloquial diction and occasional authorial intrusions. Shoveling snow, dinging alone, driving home from work are all

3 Newdick, Robert S. “Robert Frost, Teacher and Educator.” *The Journal of Higher Education* 7, no. 6 (1936): 342-44. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1974916>.

4 Liebman, Sheldon W. “Frost on Criticism.” *The New England Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (1993): 399-415. doi:10.2307/366003.

5 Deming, John. *Cold Front Magazine*. Quoted from Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/billy-collins>

6 Poetry 180 Project. Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/>

possible leaping off points for a Collins poem. Take for example the iconic breakfast cereal, Cheerios and the poem with the same title. As the poem opens, Collins places readers in a familiar morning scene that plays out across the country: eating breakfast in the restaurant while reading a newspaper.

One bright morning in a restaurant in Chicago
as I waited for my eggs and toast,
I opened the *Tribune* only to discover
that I was the same age as Cheerios.

As readers move through the poem, Collins exploits the readers' knowledge of the cereal and the equal common idiom, "older than the hills."

Already I can hear them whispering
behind my stooped and threadbare back,
Why that dude is older than Cheerios

By reinventing the colloquial expression, the poem is brought to the pinnacle of newness.

Many Collins poems possess this casual narration as well as light-handed asides and off-handed remarks directed at the readers. The poem "Marginalia," from the collection *Picnic, Lightning* demonstrates this authorial intrusion through the use of notes and comments on the margins of library books.

And if you have managed to graduate from college
without ever having written "Man vs. Nature"
in a margin, perhaps now
is the time to take one step forward.

Collins references the common practice of jotting notes in books and equally

common lesson found in an introductory English class, i.e. “man vs. nature,” but in the poem’s creation, Collins emulates the dialogue between the reader and the author of the marginal note. This authorial intrusion too can be seen in the poem “The Many Faces of Jazz” where Collins takes readers to a jazz concert. As the audience submits to the music, they begin to move their heads up and down accentuating the jazz sublime. But again Collins breaks from the flow and inserts himself with another direct address.

As far as my own jazz face goes—
and don’t tell me you don’t have one—
it hasn’t changed that much
since its debut in 1957.
It’s nothing special, easy enough to spot
in a corner of any club on any given night.
You know it, – the reptilian squint,
lips pursed, jaw clenched tight,
and, most essential, the whole
head furiously, yet almost imperceptibly
nodding
in total and absolute agreement.

The two operative phrases here are “And don’t tell me you don’t have one—” and “you know it,” which both bring the reader back into the experience of listening to jazz. By engaging the reader in this way, Collins strengthens the reader’s trust in him and strengthens the overall mood of being in the present moment. Readers can enter a Collin poem with the assurance that the journey will at least begin in familiar territory, and when it is not, the voice of the poet will intervene to provide guidance.

It is through this trust that Collins leads his reader to surprising territories they might not normally go. His plain, first-person, narrative mode surpasses the mundane, however, and while the poems themselves remain earnest, witty, and familiar, they contain profound human lessons. The poem “Lanyard,” is indicative of Collin’s this as

the poet evokes a common childhood experience of making a present for his mother but arrives at poignant realization that the generosity of a mother can only inadequately be repaid.

I found myself in the 'L' section of the dictionary
where my eyes fell upon the word, Lanyard.
No cookie nibbled by a French novelist
could send one more suddenly into the past.
A past where I sat at a workbench
at a camp by a deep Adirondack lake
learning how to braid thin plastic strips into a lanyard.
A gift for my mother.
I had never seen anyone use a lanyard.

The poem continues by playing on the imbalance of debt between the child and mother.

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
and I gave her a lanyard
She nursed me in many a sick room,
lifted teaspoons of medicine to my lips,
set cold facecloths on my forehead
then led me out into the airy light
and taught me to walk and swim and I in turn presented her with a lanyard.
'Here are thousands of meals' she said,
'and here is clothing and a good education.'
'And here is your lanyard,' I replied,
'which I made with a little help from a counselor.'
'Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth and two clear eyes to read the world.' she

whispered.

'And here, I said, 'is the lanyard I made at camp.'

'And here,' I wish to say to her now,

'is a smaller gift. Not the archaic truth,

that you can never repay your mother,

but the rueful admission that when she took the two-toned lanyard from my hands,

I was as sure as a boy could be

that this useless worthless thing I wove out of boredom

would be enough to make us even.'

The poem's movement from the sentimental (making a braid of plastic strips at summer camp) to the surprising profundity of its ending (knowing as an adult how naïve he was to think the gift could be equal to life), is characteristic of Collins's work. Collins has remarked on this process as well: "the imaginative journey of a good poem is the result of many contrivances ranging from rhetorical modulations to leaps of fanciful conjuring and sudden shifts in time and space."⁷ When reading a Collins poem, topics that at first appears simple and ordinary will quickly be transcended.

In addition to the casual and chatty tone, another feature of Collins's poetry is his constant autobiographical depiction of himself as a writer and poet.

"A colleague of mine summarized my whole professional life when she was introducing me. She said, 'when I first knew him, he was a professor who happened to be a poet; now, he's a poet who happens to be a professor.'"⁸

Yet, this depiction of himself as a poet has a two-fold purpose: while the autobiography enables readers to accompany the poet through his day to day observations in the present, these poems also teach poetics, at time explicitly. Collins

7 Billy Collins, "The Vehicle of Language," *Lapham's Quarterly*. <https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/travel/vehicle-language>.

8 Alan O'Riordan, "Out of the Ordinary Poetry," *Irish Examiner*. Aug. 14, 2014. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/features/out-of-the-ordinary-poetry-279437.html>

brings his reads along with him to his home, the library, the park all the while revealing the evolution of his ideas as a poet. The effect of this journalized style enhances the notion that poems are journeys without predetermined destinations and places the reader instantaneously in the present. This idea is not necessarily new, in fact, it echoes that of another American poet, Whitman, who described not only this journeying but also the essence of awakening to the present, to the self.

Space and Time! now I see it is true, what I guess'd at
What I'd guess'd when I loaf'd on the grass
What I'd guess'd while I lay alone in my bed,
And again as I walk'd the beach under the paling stars of the morning.⁹

Collins, like Whitman, turns the listless boredom of ordinary days into profound vignettes of the enteral.

Collins's poems allow readers to glimpse the production of a poem through an almost real-time narration. Yet the starting point of a poem and its endpoint rarely follow an expected, logical outcome. Here is Collins's to explain.

It is typical for contemporary poets to say that they don't know where they are going when they begin a poem. The claim rests on the belief in spontaneity, as if anything were purely possible in the act of composing. But the consensus is that knowing where the poem is headed amounts to a degree of calculation that, given the romance of the immediate, dooms the effort to failure. The poet should begin by not knowing much, and he or she will profit, in the phrasing of William Matthews, by maintaining the benefits of their ignorance for as long as possible. Foreknowledge eliminates the possibility of surprise. As Robert Frost said, no surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.

9 Walt Whitman. Song of Myself, part 33 . http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/poets/s_z/whitman/song.htm

In the poem “You, Reader” this autobiography also directly addresses to the reader. It is both personal and didactic in its attempt to show how a poem comes into existence.

I wonder how you are going to feel
when you find out
that I wrote this instead of you.

That it was I who got up early
to sit in the kitchen
and mention with a pen

the rain soaked windows,
the ivy wallpaper,
and the goldfish circling in its bowl.

There are several poems in Collins’s long career that share this explicit poetic tutoring. Collins says, “My favorite poets are the ones who taught me things. Influence is really the name of the game in writing poetry or writing anything, I think... No one is smart enough to go into a room and invent poetry. So people who write poetry are basically people who have read poetry and are moved by their reading to acts of emulation. The teachers of poetry are in the shelves of the library and in the anthologies. You learn by emulation.”¹⁰

Many poems include such writerly habits as searching a dictionary, reading, writing, and the explication and exemplification of poetic forms and literary history. In the poem “What I learned Today,” the poet begins:

I had never heard of John Bernard Flannagan,

10 Kelly Hochbein, “Renowned Poet Billy Collins Shares Insights and Influences With Students,” *Lehigh University Bulletin* 2015. <https://www1.lehigh.edu/news/voice-form-and-looney-tunes>.

American sculpture,
until I found him on page 961
of the single volume encyclopedia I am reading
at the rate of one page a day.

This poem, a sprawling exploration of the F-section of an encyclopedia, encompasses such topics as *flannel*, *fog* and *Flathead Indians* only to arrive at the anticipation of reading about *flax* tomorrow. Just as unnoticed as the poem's opening lines were, so too is its surprising closure.

It is time to float on the waters of the night.
Time to wrap my arms around this book
and press it to my chest, life preserver
in a sea of unremarkable men and women,
anonymous faces on the street,
a hundred thousand unalphabetized things,
a million forgot hours.

The habit of writing and reading is evident throughout his work. For Collins, words serve as “life preserver” and the limitless goal of learning every fact, every “unremarkable” person and “a hundred thousand unalphabetized things” lays at the center of his living and writing. Again, Collins on writing: “So unlike some poets I’m not really pouring out my misery here...I’m really involved in some playful game with language. It’s a serious game, in some ways, but it’s a game too.” In the poem, “The Trouble with Poetry” Collins explains just what this game is in the context of writing poetry.

...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.

And what an unmerry band of thieves we are,
cut-purses, common shoplifters,
I thought to myself
as a cold wave swirled around my feet
and the lighthouse moved its megaphone over the sea,
which is an image I stole directly
from Lawrence Ferlinghetti —
to be perfectly honest for a moment —

According to Collins to write poetry, means to read it, the copy it, to emulate it in a playful, bemused manner — to follow the mind and record its journey. For Collins, poetry doesn't not have to be flogged in order for meaning to be released as is the case in an "Introduction to Poetry."

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room

and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to water-ski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

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 what it really means.

Perhaps it is this acceptance that poetry reaches us not through its seriousness but rather through its delicate searching and smooth surface.

Collins's didacticism become even more overt in the poem "The Great American Poem," which teaches poetry by examining the reader's understanding of the basic structural format of a novel.

If this were a novel,
it would begin with a character,
a man alone on a southbound train
or a young girl on a swing by a farmhouse.

And as the pages turned, you would be told
that it was morning or the dead of night,
and I, the narrator, would describe
for you the miscellaneous clouds over the farmhouse

As the poem progresses through a sequence of imaginary, potential plots, Collins

delivers his poetic instruction.

But this is a poem, not a novel,
and the only characters here are you and I,
alone in an imaginary room
which will disappear after a few more lines,

leaving us no time to point guns at one another
or toss all our clothes into a roaring fireplace.
I ask you: who needs the man on the train
and who cares what his black valise contains?

We have something better than all this turbulence
lurching toward some ruinous conclusion.
I mean the sound that we will hear
as soon as I stop writing and put down this pen.

I once heard someone compare it
to the sound of crickets in a field of wheat
or, more faintly, just the wind
over that field stirring things that we will never see.

Through the deconstruction of the novel's parts, the essence of poetry is revealed, that is, that poetry's charm rises out of surprises set free from the shackles of logic. But the force of the poem is its informality and direct engagement with the reader. "The only characters here are you and I," the poem states as if to say here in the present all things remain possible. Readers of Collins's poetry will receive lessons on Irish Poetry, Frost, Dickenson, Japanese haikus, sonnets, and villanelles just to name a few. In the poem, *Taking Off Emily Dickenson's Clothes*, Collins educated readers on American literary history through the chronology of his undressing the shy, frail Emily:

First, her tippet made of tulle
easily lifted off her shoulders
and laid on the back of a wooden chair

Collins's use of period pieces, the "tulle," and the "wooden chair" is just enough to set the nineteenth century mood. However, Collins pushes even further:

The complexity of women's undergarments
in nineteenth-century America
is not to be waved off and then,
what I can tell you is
it was terribly quiet in Amherst that
Sabbath afternoon

These lines accentuate not only the stereotype of Calvinist Amherst, but also stereotypical assumptions that literature is inherently conservative. That poetry has to be serious, in order to be poetry. In an October 29, 2013 interview with Jeffrey Brown on PBS News Hour, Collins mentioned his trouble with the assumed seriousness that people think poetry requires. "It took me long time to allow anything like fun into my poems," the poet said.¹¹ But Collins is far from just silly. "In many of these poems, quite frankly, there's a game being played, which the reader can play also," he said. Collins wants to believe that poetry is at the fingertips of everyone. He says, "You can write a contra-poem to that in which the universe is being supported on the head of Joan of Arc or Barack Obama or your sister Deirdre, I mean, anybody, and you could play with that."¹²

11 Collins, Billy, PBS New Hour, "Interview with Billy Collins" by Jeffrey Brown. Oct. 29, 2013.

12 NPR.org. "Billy Collins on How to Become a Poet." <https://www.npr.org/2016/12/14/504716937/billy-collins-on-how-to-become-a-poet-and-why-poetry-can-be-a-game>

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