



CRITICISM

VOLUME

191

Poetry Criticism

*Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 191

Lawrence J. Trudeau
Editor

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Poetry Criticism

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Preface

Poetry Criticism (PC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. This series was developed in response to suggestions from librarians serving high school, college, and public library patrons, who had noted a considerable number of requests for critical material on poems and poets. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, librarians perceived the need for a series devoted solely to poets and poetry.

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- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." *Interpreting Blake*. Ed. Michael Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978. 32-69. Rpt. in *Poetry Criticism*. Ed. Michelle Lee. Vol. 63. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 34-51. Print.

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William Collins

1721-1759

English poet.

The following entry provides criticism of Collins's life and poetic works. For additional information about Collins, see *PC*, Volume 72.

INTRODUCTION

William Collins was an important transitional figure between the rationalistic and satirical poets of the earlier part of the eighteenth century and the Romantic poets of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Best known for the lyricism and sensuous descriptiveness of the poems collected in his 1746 volume *Odes on Several Descriptive and Allegoric Subjects*, Collins is often cited alongside his contemporary Thomas Gray for his emotional and introspective approach to poetry. His literary reputation fluctuated in the centuries following his death, with some critics declaring him a major poet and others characterizing him as noteworthy but minor, often lamenting that his mental illness and early death may have prevented him from reaching his full literary potential.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Collins was born in Chichester in southeastern England on 25 December 1721, the youngest of three children of William Collins, a hatter and two-time mayor of the city, and his wife, Elizabeth Martin. Relatively little is known of Collins's childhood. Scholars have speculated that he was either tutored at home or sent to the local Prebendal School. In 1734 he began attending Winchester College. One of his classmates, future poet and headmaster of the college, Joseph Warton, played a substantial role in Collins's literary development, and he spent much of his time at Winchester composing poetry. His first poem is sometimes identified as the verse satire "Battle of the School Books," which is no longer extant. In 1739 he published at least one poem anonymously in the *Gentleman's Magazine*.

Upon leaving Winchester in 1740, Collins hoped to attend New College, Oxford, on a fellowship, but in the absence of any vacancies that year, he enrolled at the Queens College, Oxford. In 1741 he entered Magdalen College on a

demyship, which amounted to about half of a fellowship. While there, he published his first major poetical work, *Persian Eclogues* (1742), most of which he had apparently written during his time at Winchester. He received a bachelor's degree in November 1743, and one month later he published the poem *Verses Humbly Address'd to Sir Thomas Hanmer* (1743). A revised second edition published the following year appended an additional poem and marked the first time Collins included his name on one of his printed works.

After leaving Oxford, Collins moved to London, where he met writer and critic Samuel Johnson and attempted, mostly unsuccessfully, to make a living through his writing. During this period, he initiated but failed to complete multiple literary projects, including a translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* (after 335 bc), and experienced numerous financial difficulties. He also contemplated careers in the clergy and the army but did not pursue either. In 1746 he and Warton planned a collaborative volume of odes. That book never materialized, but both authors published collections of their own later that year. Collins's volume, *Odes on Several Descriptive and Allegoric Subjects*, eventually became the principal foundation for his reputation as a significant poet, but at the time it was largely ignored.

Collins wrote additional poems over the next few years, but his creative endeavors were interrupted in 1751 by the onset of physical and mental decline. The precise nature of his illness is unknown, though Johnson characterized it as "not alienation of mind, but general laxity and feebleness, a deficiency rather of his vital than intellectual powers." It apparently led him to travel variously to Bath and to France between 1751 and 1754 in the hope of relieving its symptoms. He spent part of 1754 in a private mental institution in Chelsea, after which his sister Anne took him back to Chichester, where she cared for him for the rest of his life. He died on 12 June 1759.

MAJOR POETIC WORKS

Collins's most famous work during his lifetime was *Persian Eclogues*, which was republished under the title *Oriental Eclogues* in 1757. The volume consists of four interlinked Persian poems—"Selim," "Hassan," "Abra,"

and “Agib and Secander”—translated into English, though in fact they bear little similarity to Persian poetry and, apart from their setting, strongly resemble the neoclassical pastoral poems of eighteenth-century England, particularly those written by Alexander Pope. Collins had never been to Persia at the time of the poems’ composition, and his attempts to evoke a sense of place and cultural atmosphere were informed primarily by the depiction of Persia in Thomas Salmon’s *Modern History* (1724–39). The poems are now little read, and Collins himself was later embarrassed by their lack of authenticity, referring to them derisively as “Irish eclogues.” Despite these deficiencies, the eclogues are regarded as a remarkably precocious achievement for a poet who was likely only seventeen at the time he wrote them.

Far more central to Collins’s reputation are the twelve odes assembled in *Odes on Several Descriptive and Allegoric Subjects*. The collection begins with a pair of odes to the emotions of pity and fear, a poetic focus critics have identified as the product of Collins’s ongoing interest in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which identifies pity and fear as the two central emotions evoked by tragedy. Both “Ode to Pity” and “Ode to Fear” are heavily indebted to the work of John Milton. Each consists of a lengthy encomium on the emotion in question—presented anthropomorphically as a woman, as is common in Collins’s treatment of abstract concepts—followed by a plea from the speaker to the emotion for permission to dwell with her. The two poems are in large part about the poet-speaker being inspired through the presence of a personified abstraction, a topic that recurs throughout the collection, including in the next poem, “Ode to Simplicity,” which discusses the importance of a simple, natural-seeming verse style.

Among the most renowned and heavily scrutinized of Collins’s works is the collection’s fourth poem, “Ode on the Poetical Character,” an ambiguous paean to the personification of Fancy, who is placed on an equal footing with God. The next four poems are somewhat less abstract, either dealing with specific events—as in “Ode to a Lady, on the Death of Colonel Ross in the Action of Fontenoy”—or using philosophical disquisitions as a vehicle for reflecting on Britain’s geopolitical situation—as in “Ode to Liberty.” “Ode to Evening,” the collection’s only unrhymed poem, is a pastoral meditation on the natural world and the passing of time that scholars have cited as a forerunner to John Keats’s “To Autumn” (1820). Collins briefly addresses the state of Britain again in “Ode to Peace,” then returns to the aesthetic concerns of the collection’s first poems in “The Manners. An Ode” and “The Passions. An Ode for Music.” The latter ode was set to music on multiple occasions, and it eventu-

ally became a prominent recitation piece, though its renown has since been eclipsed by some of Collins’s more contemplative odes.

Collins wrote relatively little after publishing *Odes on Several Descriptive and Allegoric Subjects*. Among his few subsequent poems of note are *Ode Occasion’d by the Death of Mr. Thomson* (1749), a tribute to his friend and fellow poet James Thomson, and the uncompleted, posthumously published *An Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands of Scotland* (1788), inspired by Collins’s friendship with Scottish minister and playwright John Home.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Although *Persian Eclogues* achieved some popular success during Collins’s lifetime, *Odes on Several Descriptive and Allegoric Subjects* attracted almost no comment, and his work as a whole languished in relative obscurity for about two decades following his death. In the later decades of the eighteenth century, his reputation recovered, and readers began to see him as a poet of considerable distinction, if not necessarily of the first rank. Critical judgments about the extent of his literary accomplishments have varied in enthusiasm. J. Langhorne (1765), the editor of the first edition of Collins’s collected works, exemplified the more effusive end of the spectrum in his assertion regarding “The Passions. An Ode for Music” that “there may be very little hazard in asserting that this is the finest ode in the English language.” Poet and editor Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1797) offered a more measured evaluation of Collins’s work in her preface to another edition, stating, “Collins, amongst our English Authors, has cultivated the Lyric Muse with peculiar felicity; his works are small in bulk, but highly finished; and have deservedly gained him a respectable rank amongst our minor Poets.”

Much scholarly writing on Collins has concentrated on his life. Johnson’s biographical sketch of Collins, first published as “Some Account of the Life and Writings of Mr. William Collins” in the 1763 *Poetical Calendar* and then greatly revised for inclusion in Johnson’s *Lives of the English Poets* (1781), has attracted particular attention as one of the few accounts of Collins’s life written by one of his contemporaries. Mary Margaret Stewart (1988) juxtaposed the presentation of Collins’s financial circumstances in these early accounts with information yielded by surviving legal documents pertaining to him, arguing that, by selectively excluding certain details demonstrating Collins’s wasteful management of his finances, “Johnson lets his reader believe that Collins was a poor, struggling

poet. He presents a rather romantic image.” Sandro Jung (2004; see Further Reading) considered the metamorphosis of Johnson’s biographical account from its initial composition to its final version, noting that “whilst the contribution to *The Poetical Calendar* ought to be understood as a gesture of goodwill towards a man Johnson remembered with fondness,” the more rigorously critical content of the later text reflects the fact that, by 1781, “it was no longer necessary to justify or defend the choice of Collins as a major poet of the mid-century.”

Other scholarship emphasizes the structural principles or thematic motifs of Collins’s poems. Ricardo Quintana (1963) presented an influential reading of the arrangement and interrelations of the poems in *Odes on Several Descriptive and Allegoric Subjects*. He divided the odes into two groups and argued that one set addresses different kinds of poetry while the other is patriotic in focus. Quintana highlighted “Ode to Evening” as an intermediary poem that “appears to stand midway between the two groups, at once defining the mood of the pastoral and bringing pastoralism and patriotism close to one another.” Jung (2006) considered the antipictorialism of Collins’s approach to description, remarking, “Collins does not favour one-dimensional sensuous perception such as visualisation through concrete descriptive adjuncts” but instead “creates a surrogate reality in which the personifications he invokes are living entities with spiritual personality and character rather than clearly defined corporeal attributes.”

James Overholtzer

Academic Advisor: Sandro Jung,
Ghent University

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

**Persian Eclogues: Written Originally for the Entertainment of the Ladies of Tauris. And Now First Translated, &c.* As Anonymous. London: Roberts, 1742. Rev. ed. *Oriental Eclogues: Written Originally for the Entertainment of the Ladies of Tauris. And Now Translated.* London: Payne, 1757. Print.

Verses Humbly Address’d to Sir Thomas Hanmer: On His Edition of Shakespear’s Works. By a Gentleman of Oxford. London: Cooper, 1743. Rev. ed. *An Epistle: Address to Sir Thomas Hanmer, on His Edition of Shakespear’s Works. The Second Edition. To Which Is*

Added a Song from Cymbeline of the Same Author. London: Dodsley and Cooper, 1744. Print.

†*Odes on Several Descriptive and Allegoric Subjects.* London: Millar, 1746. Print.

Ode Occasion’d by the Death of Mr. Thomson. London: Manby and Cox, 1749. Print.

The Passions: An Ode. Written by Mr. Collins. Set to Music by Doctor Hayes. Oxford: n.p., 1750. Print.

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*Includes the poems “Abra; or, The Georgian Sultana,” “Agib and Secander; or, The Fugitives,” “Hassan; or, The Camel-Driver,” and “Selim; or, The Shepherd’s Moral.”

†Includes the poems “The Manners. An Ode”; “Ode on the Poetical Character”; “Ode to a Lady, on the Death of Colonel Ross in the Action of Fontenoy”; “Ode to Evening”; “Ode to Fear”; “Ode to Liberty”; “Ode to Peace”; “Ode to Pity”; “Ode to Simplicity”; and “The Passions. An Ode for Music.”

CRITICISM

J. Langhorne (essay date 1765)

SOURCE: Langhorne, J. "General Observations on the Odes Descriptive and Allegorical." *The Poetical Works of Mr. William Collins: With Memoirs of the Author; and Observations on His Genius and Writings*. London: Beck- et and Dehondt, 1765. 99-130. Print.

[In the following essay, Langhorne notes the distinguishing features of Collins's odes, focusing particularly on his treatment of description and allegory in brief analyses of each work in the collection.]

The genius of Collins was capable of every degree of excellence in lyric poetry, and perfectly qualified for that high province of the muse. Possessed of a native ear for all the varieties of harmony and modulation, susceptible of the finest feelings of tenderness and humanity, but, above all, carried away by that high enthusiasm, which gives to imagination its strongest colouring, he was, at once, capable of soothing the ear with the melody of his numbers, of influencing the passions by the force of his *pathos*, and of gratifying the fancy by the luxury of description.

In consequence of these powers, but, more particularly, in consideration of the last, he chose such subjects for his lyric essays as were most favourable for the indulgence of description and allegory; where he could exercise his powers in moral and personal painting; where he could exert his invention in conferring new attributes on images or objects already known, and described, by a determinate number of characteristics; where he might give an uncommon eclat to his figures, by placing them in higher attitudes, or in more advantageous lights, and introduce new forms from the moral and intellectual world into the society of impersonated beings.

Such, no doubt, were the advantages he derived from the descriptive and allegorical nature of his themes.

It seems to have been the whole industry of our author (and it is, at the same time, almost all the claim to moral excellence his writings can boast) to promote the influence of the social virtues, by painting them in the fairest and happiest lights.

Melior fieri tuendo would be no improper motto to his poems in general, but of his lyric poems it seems to be the whole moral tendency and effect. If, therefor, it should appear to some readers that he has been more industrious to cultivate description than sentiment; it may be observed

that his descriptions themselves are sentimental, and answer the whole end of that species of writing, by embellishing every feature of virtue, and by conveying, through the effects of the pencil, the finest moral lessons to the mind.

Horace speaks of the fidelity of the ear in preference to the uncertainty of the eye; but if the mind receives conviction, it is, certainly, of very little importance through what medium, or by which of the senses it is conveyed. The impressions left on the imagination may, possibly, be thought less durable than the deposits of the memory, but it may very well admit of a question whether a conclusion of reason, or an impression of imagination, will soonest make its way to the heart. A moral precept conveyed in words is only an account of truth in its effects; a moral picture is truth exemplified; and which is most likely to gain on the affections, it may not be difficult to determine.

This, however, must be allowed, that those works approach the nearest to perfection which unite these powers and advantages; which at once influence the imagination, and engage the memory; the former by the force of animated, and striking description, the latter by a brief but harmonious conveyance of precept: thus, while the heart is influenced through the operation of the passions, or the fancy, the effect, which might otherwise have been transient, is secured by the co-operating power of the memory, which treasures up in a short aphorism the moral of the scene.

This is a good reason, and this, perhaps, is the only reason that can be given, why our dramatic performances should generally end with a chain of couplets. In these the moral of the whole piece is usually conveyed, and that assistance which the memory borrows from rhyme, as it was probably the original cause of it, gives its usefulness and propriety even there.

After these apologies for the *descriptive* turn of the following odes, something remains to be said on the origin and use of *allegory* in poetical composition.

By this we are not to understand the trope in the schools, which is defined *aliud verbis, aliud sensu ostendere*, and of which Quintilian says, *Usus est, ut tristitia dicamus melioribus verbis, aut bonæ rei gratia quædam contrariis significemus*, etc. It is not the verbal, but the sentimental allegory, not allegorical expression (which, indeed, might come under the term of *metaphor*) but allegorical imagery, that is here in question.

When we endeavour to trace this species of figurative sentiment to its origin, we find it coeval with literature

itself. It is generally agreed that the most ancient productions are poetical, and it is certain that the most ancient poems abound with allegorical imagery.

If, then, it be allowed that the first literary productions were poetical, we shall have little or no difficulty in discovering the origin of allegory.

At the birth of letters, in the transition from hieroglyphical to literal expression, it is not to be wondered if the custom of expressing ideas by personal images, which had so long prevailed, should still retain its influence on the mind, though the use of letters had rendered the practical application of it superfluous. Those who had been accustomed to express strength by the image of an elephant, swiftness by that of a panther, and courage by that of a lion, would make no scruple of substituting, in letters, the symbols for the ideas they had been used to represent.

Here we plainly see the origin of *allegorical expression*, that it arose from the *ashes* of hieroglyphics; and if to the same cause we should refer that figurative boldness of style and imagery which distinguish the oriental writings, we shall, perhaps, conclude more justly, than if we should impute it to the superior grandeur of the eastern genius.

From the same source with the *verbal*, we are to derive the *sentimental* allegory, which is nothing more than a continuation of the metaphorical or symbolical expression of the several agents in an action, or the different objects in a scene.

The latter most peculiarly comes under the denomination of allegorical imagery; and in this species of allegory we include the impersonation of passions, affections, virtues and vices, *etc.* on account of which, principally, the following odes were properly termed by their author, allegorical.

With respect to the utility of this figurative writing, the same arguments, that have been advanced in favour of descriptive poetry, will be of weight likewise here. It is, indeed from impersonation, or, as it is commonly termed personification, that poetical description borrows its chief powers and graces. Without the aid of this, moral and intellectual painting would be flat and unanimated, and even the scenery of material objects would be dull without the introduction of fictitious life.

These observations will be most effectually illustrated by the sublime and beautiful odes that occasioned them: in those it will appear how happily this allegorical painting may be executed by the genuine powers of poetical genius,

and they will not fail to prove its force and utility by passing through the imagination to the heart.

ODE TO PITY

By Pella's Bard, a magic name,
By all the griefs his thought could frame,
Receive my humble rite:
Long, Pity, let the nations view
Thy sky-worn robes of tenderest blue,
And eyes of dewy light!

The propriety of invoking Pity through the mediation of Euripides is obvious.—That admirable poet had the keys of all the tender passions, and, therefor, could not but stand in the highest esteem with a writer of Mr. Collins's sensibility.—He did, indeed, admire him as much as Milton professedly did, and probably for the same reasons; but we do not find that he has copied him so closely as the last mentioned poet has sometimes done, and particularly in the opening of *Samson-Agonistes*, which is an evident imitation of the following passage in the ΦΟΙΝΙΣΣΑΙ.

Ἦγοῦ πάροιθε, θύγατερ, ὡς τυφλῷ ποδὶ
Ὀφθαλμὸς εἶ σὺ, ναυτίλοισιν ἄστρον ὥς·
Δεῦρ' εἰς τὸ λευρὸν πέδον ἵχνος τιθεῖς ἔμὸν,
Πρόβαινε—

Act III. Sc. I

The "eyes of dewy light" is one of the happiest strokes of imagination, and may be ranked among those expressions which give us back the image of the mind.

Wild Arun too has heard thy strains,
And Echo, 'midst thy native plains,
Been sooth'd, with Pity's lute.

There first the wren thy myrtles shed
On gentlest Otway's infant head.

Sussex, in which country the Arun is a small river, had the honour of giving birth to Otway as well as to Collins. Both these poets became the objects of that pity by which their writings are distinguished. There was a similitude in their genius and in their sufferings. There was a resemblance in the misfortunes and in the dissipation of their lives; and the circumstances of their death cannot be remembered without pain.

The thought of painting in the temple of Pity the history of human misfortunes, and of drawing the scenes from the tragic muse, is very happy, and in every respect worthy the imagination of Collins.

ODE TO FEAR

Mr. C—— who had often determined to apply himself to dramatic poetry, seems here, with the same view, to have

addressed one of the principal powers of the drama, and to implore that mighty influence she had given to the genius of Shakespear:

Hither again thy fury deal,
Teach me but once like him to feel:
His cypress wreath my meed decree,
And I, O Fear, will dwell with thee!

In the construction of this nervous ode the author has shewn equal power of judgment and imagination. Nothing can be more striking than the violent and abrupt abbreviation of the measure in the fifth and sixth verses, when he feels the strong influences of the power he invokes:

'Ah Fear! ah frantic Fear!
I see, I see thee near.

The editor of these poems has met with nothing in the same species of poetry, either in his own, or in any other language, equal, in all respects, to the following description of Danger.

Danger, whose limbs of giant-mold,
What mortal eye can fix'd behold?
Who stalks his round and hideous form,
Howling amidst the midnight storm,
Or throws him on the ridgy steep
Of some loose, hanging rock to sleep.

It is impossible to contemplate the image conveyed in the two last verses without these emotions of terror it was intended to excite. It has, moreover, the entire advantage of novelty to recommend it; for there is too much originality in all the circumstances to suppose that the author had in his eye that description of the penal situation of Cataline in the ninth *Æneid*:

... Te, Catalina, minaci
Pendentem scopulo ...

The archetype of the English poet's idea was in nature, and probably, to her alone he was indebted for the thought. From her, likewise, he derived that magnificence of conception, that horrible grandeur of imagery displayed in the following lines.

And those, the fiends, who near allied,
O'er Nature's wounds, and wrecks preside;
While Vengeance, in the lurid air,
Lifts her red arm, expos'd and bare:
On whom the ravening Brood of fate,
Who lap the blood of Sorrow, wait.

That nutritive enthusiasm, which cherishes the seeds of poetry, and which is, indeed, the only soil wherein they will grow to perfection, lays open the mind to all the influences of fiction. A passion for whatever is greatly wild, or magnificent in the works of nature, seduces the imagi-

nation to attend to all that is extravagant, however unnatural. Milton was notoriously fond of high romance, and gothic *diableries*; and Collins, who in genius and enthusiasm bore no very distant resemblance to Milton, was wholly carried away by the same attachments.

Be mine to read the visions old,
Which thy awakening bards have told:
And, lest thou meet my blasted view,
Hold each strange tale devoutly true.

On that thrice hallow'd eve, *etc.*

There is an old traditionary superstition, that on St. Mark's eve the forms of all such persons as shall die within the ensuing year, make their solemn entry into the churches of their respective parishes, as St. Patrick swam over the channel, without their heads.

ODE TO SIMPLICITY

The measure of the ancient ballad seems to have been made choice of for this ode, on account of the subject, and it has, indeed, an air of simplicity, not altogether unaffecting.

By all the honey'd store
On Hybla's thymy shore,
By all her blooms, and mingled murmurs dear,
By her whose love-lorn woe,
In evening musings slow,
Sooth'd sweetly sad Electra's poet's ear.

This allegorical imagery of the honey'd store, the blooms, and mingled murmurs of Hybla, alluding to the sweetness and beauty of the *attic* poetry, has the finest and the happiest effect: yet, possibly, it will bear a question whether the ancient Greek tragedians had a general claim to simplicity in any thing more than the plans of their drama. Their language, at least, was infinitely metaphorical; yet it must be owned that they justly copied nature and the passions, and so far, certainly, they were entitled to the palm of true simplicity: the following most beautiful speech of Polynices will be a monument of this so long as poetry shall last.

—πολύδακρυς δ' ἀφικόμενη
Χρόνιος ἰδὼν μέλαθρα, καὶ βωμοὺς θεῶν,
Γυμνάσιά θ' οἷσιν ἐνετράφην, Δίρκης, θ' ὕδωρ,
Ὅν οὐ δικάϊως ἀπελαθεῖς, ξένην πόλιν
Ναίω, δι' ὅσων νᾶμ' ἔχων δακρυρρόοῦν.
Ἀλλ' ἐκ γὰρ ἄλγους ἄλγος αὖ, σὲ δέρκομαι
Κάοα ξυρηκὲς, καὶ πέπλους μελαγχίμους
Ἐχουσάν.

Eurip.

But staid to sing alone
To one distinguish'd throne.