WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

THE POETRY OF WILLIAM COLLINS

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THE first poem by William Collins that we know, if we dismiss the *Hercules* of 1738, is the astonishingly perfect 'When Phoebe form'd a wanton smile', written when Collins was sixteen. The last that we know of is the fragment of an ode for music written in 1750 when Collins was twenty-eight. For the remaining nine years of his life Collins slowly sank into a state of lethargy. He becomes 'poor Collins', 'poor dear Collins'. But the references to him in Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry* show that he kept his collection of early books, made to provide material for his *History of the Revival of Learning under Leo X*.[1] That collection was dispersed only at his death. And on their visits to him in September 1754 and again, according to Thomas Warton, 'not many months before his death', the Wartons found him willing to show them poems—the *Popular Superstitions* ode and *The Bell of Aragon*—and to talk on literary antiquarian topics.

'Some few' of the 'many scarce books' collected by Collins 'fell into' Thomas Warton's hands when Collins died in June 1759. It is likely therefore that some small part of the erudition of Warton in his *History* derives from Collins. The notes which Warton made, listing pieces of information given in those late conversations, when compared with the use made of them in the *Observations on the Faerie Queene* (1762), and the *History*, show that Warton did not always identify his source as 'my lamented friend'.[2] On three occasions when Warton does elaborately refer to Collins in the *History* it is to authenticate books which no one else has seen. But I am convinced that Warton had seen them. There would be no point, in that avalanche of information which the *History* is, in inventing 'a thin folio of two sheets in black letter, containing a poem in the octave

[1] Thomas Warton, *History of English Poetry* (edn. 1824), iii. 185.

[2] See J. S. Cunningham, *William Collins, Drafts and Fragments of Verse* (Oxford, 1956), pp. 45–8.

stanza, entitled, FABYL'S GHOSTE, printed by John Rastell in the year 1533', merely to comment that 'the piece is of no merit'.[1] On each occasion Warton seems to have transcribed the title-page and to know the contents.[2] 'I wish I had examined [it] more carefully', he says of one of them, because it might have been the source for *The Taming of the Shrew*. It would be too disturbing to think that the scholar in whose honour this lecture is given annually, should deliberately use the name of his 'lamented friend', 'whose ODES will be remembered while any taste for true poetry remains', as an excuse for foisting useless inventions on his reader.[3] Thomas Warton was prepared to do strange things. An anonymous poem called 'Verses written in a blank leaf of Mr Warton's Observations on Spenser' appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for May 1755. Slightly rewritten, it appears again in Thomas Warton's *Poems* in 1777, with the title 'Sent to Mr Upton on his Edition of the Faerie Queene'. Warton was not going to waste what had been a 'puff' for the book he was justifiably very proud of.[4] But I think he is honest in his references to Collins's library. He had clearly looked into *Aurelio and Isabella* (1586), in the hope that Collins was right when he told him that here he would find the source for Shakespeare's *Tempest*.[5] And he has to report that, though 'Mr Collins had searched this subject with no less fidelity, than judgment and industry', yet Collins was wrong. Equally, Warton must have been excited by Collins's information that he would find the 'nomina daemonum' in *The Midsummer Night's Dream* in 'Pontanus's Denmark'.[6] But alas, if he ever looked, he would have found, as we do, that Collins was wrong again. It could be, of course, that Warton had made his notes too long after the conversation, and not remembered correctly. Certainly Joseph Warton, in *his* brief note of Colonel Bladen, and the use

[1] Warton, *History of English Poetry* (edn. 1824), iii. 365.

[2] Skelton's *The Nigramansir* is described in the *History* (1824), iii. 185, and Richard Edwards's comic stories at iv. 117.

[3] See Professor D. Nichol Smith's discussion of this problem in his Warton Lecture in 1929, pp. 25–7.

[4] See my introduction to the forthcoming facsimile reprint of Warton's *Observations on The Faerie Queene* (1754), Scolar Press, and F. S. Miller, 'Did Thomas Warton borrow from himself?', *MLN*, 51 (1936), 151–4.

[5] Warton passed this information to Johnson, who put it in the Appendix to his edition of Shakespeare in 1765. It was corrected in the 1773 edition. See *Correspondence of Percy and Farmer*, ed. C. Brooks (Baton Rouge, 1946), pp. 141–2, and *History of English Poetry* (1824), iv. 309.

[6] Cunningham, p. 46.

he made of it in his edition of Pope, shows that he had confused Thomas Bladen with Collins's uncle Colonel Martin, to produce a Colonel Martin Bladen.

When we think of the poet Collins we cannot but be impressed by the range of his reading in sixteenth-century literature in English and Italian, French and Spanish.[1] He did complete his introduction to his account of the revival of learning under Leo X, and Warton says that 'it was written with great judgment, precision, and knowledge of the subject'.[2] It is clear that the Wartons had great expectations of that history; Joseph, for example, advertised it in the first volume of his *Essay* on Pope (1756), indicating that it would deal with the fourth of the five 'ages of the world in which the human mind has exerted itself in an extraordinary manner', and that its subjects would include Ariosto, Tasso, Fracastorius, Sannazaro, Vida, Bembo, Sadolet, Machiavelli, Guicciardini, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Titian, the discovery of the West-Indies and the passage to the East, the invention of printing, and the reformation of religion.[3] Collins was for the Wartons, as for Samuel Johnson, a young man of 'busy and forcible mind', 'full of hopes, and full of projects, versed in many languages, high in fancy, and strong in retention'.[4] But while they might later remember him with tenderness, or consider him as a living warning of the uncertainty of the continuation of reason, when they thought of his poetry they were content to praise it in vague terms. Collins had 'a strong and fruitful imagination', said Joseph Warton, but when he wished to instance modern odes it was those of Akenside, Gilbert West, Mason, and Gray that went into the text; Collins has a mention in a footnote.[5] The only poem mentioned by Joseph is the 'Ode on the Death of Colonel Ross', as 'a very pretty one';[6] it is surely Collins's weakest ode. And yet the twelve odes in the 1746 volume, by which Collins is now best remembered, were written in close competition with

[1] He knew, for example, the works of Giovanni della Casa (1503–56), of Jacopo Sannazaro (*c.* 1455–1530), of Petrarch (1304–74). See Cunningham, pp. 46–7.

[2] See P. L. Carver, *The Life of a Poet* (1967), p. 176.

[3] J. Warton, *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (edn. 1806), i. 181–2. Dr. Johnson thought of a history of the same period, see Sir John Hawkins, *Life of Dr. Samuel Johnson* (edn. 1787), p. 83, and Boswell's *Life*, iv. 381–4.

[4] Johnson to J. Warton, 8 March 1754.

[5] J. Warton, *Essay on Pope* (1806), i. 67 n.

[6] J. Warton to T. Warton, [May, 1746], in J. Wooll, *Memoirs of Joseph Warton* (1806), pp. 14–15 n.

the Wartons—perhaps that is why their response seems lukewarm. Thomas is anxious for us to know that Collins's 'Ode on the Passions' was preceded by Joseph's 'Assembly of the Passions', and that Collins's 'Ode to Evening' followed Joseph's ode with that title.[1] He knew that he himself, his father, and his brother had used the Miltonic version of Horace's metre before Collins. In letters between the brothers in April 1745, it is clear that Joseph was writing an 'Ode to Pity' that would contain a temple,[2] and Thomas certainly thought that Collins had borrowed the idea. It must have seemed to the young Thomas Warton, so fiercely admiring his elder brother Joseph, that Collins had deliberately taken over much of their critical position and enthusiasms—the delight in Spenser and in Milton's then unfashionable minor poems, the Wartonian longing to 'revive the just designs of Greece',[3] the desire to 'bring back poetry into its right channel' by writing odes descriptive and allegorical. If Dr. Lonsdale is right in suggesting that most of Collins's twelve odes were written after the meeting with Joseph at Guildford Races in May 1746, then it must have seemed that even the notion of writing and printing a volume of odes derived from Joseph. It was certainly as a result of that meeting that Collins's 'Ode on the Death of Colonel Ross' appeared in *The Museum* for 7 June 1746 (i. 215–17), just twelve months after it had been written, according to Collins's careful dating. But if it sometimes appears that Collins is heavily indebted to the Wartons in the period between his leaving Oxford in January 1744 and the publication of his *Odes* in December 1746, after which he moved to Richmond, we must also remember that he showed a great deal of initiative as well. He wrote his 'Dirge from Cymbeline', showing that he was able to write a poem for a context already existing, but which 'Fear no more the heat

[1] In T. Warton's edition of Milton's *Poems on Several Occasions* (1785), 369 n. See R. Lonsdale, *The Poems of Gray, Collins and Goldsmith* (1969), p. 479.

[2] Printed from the manuscript in the British Museum in E. L. Hart, *Minor Lives: A Collection of Biographies by John Nichols* (Camb., Mass.), 1971, pp. 150–1. See Lonsdale, p. 415, Thomas was anxious that Collins's debt to Joseph in this poem should also be known. There is, perhaps, no need to speculate about Collins's commentary on Aristotle and the 'Ode to Pity'—Joseph Warton could write an 'Ode to Pity' without writing on Aristotle!

[3] Joseph printed three of his father's translations of Greek epigrams, as examples of the 'Simplicity' of Greek poetry, in *The Museum* for 31 January, 1747, (ii. 314–15). Akenside was, in his *Odes* (1745), aiming to write such verse 'as when Greece to her immortal shell, Rejoicing listened'.

o' the sun' did not quite fill. He rewrote his bid for patronage, the *Epistle to Hanmer*. He was collecting subscriptions for his proposed *History of the Revival of Learning*, planning tragedies, a commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*, and articles for the *Biographia Britannica*. He made two visits to Holland, toyed with the idea of taking orders, and spent 'his time in all the dissipation of Ranelagh, Vauxhall, and the play-houses'. He got to know Johnson, Armstrong, J. G. Cooper, and the actors Quinn, Garrick, Foote, and Davies. He it was who, in April 1745, sent to Joseph Warton copies of Akenside's *Odes* and Thomson's new play *Tancred and Sigismunda*.[1] And he wrote the *Odes*.

What strikes one about Collins is that he had no difficulty in finding subjects for poems, though he had difficulty in finishing a poem, and, according to John Ragsdale, he often threw poems into the fire when they failed to satisfy him. Also, again according to Ragsdale, Collins was in the habit of producing verses 'suddenly written on particular occasions' of the 'Seventh Son of Doctor John / Physician and Chirurgeon' type.[2] He could write on the production of an edition of Shakespeare, or an edition of Fairfax's *Tasso* (though these verses do not survive). When his new friend John Home returned to Scotland, Collins wrote a long 'Ode to a Friend'. He never quite completed his epistles to James Harris and Jacob Tonson, to 'a Fastidious Critic', and to 'A Friend about to visit Italy'. But the problems were technical; he was not puzzled by the problem of what occasion demanded a poem; occasions were all round him.

Some of the occasions may have been suggested to him by the knowledge that Joseph Warton was struggling with an 'Ode to Pity' or an 'Ode to Evening'. But his own interest in Aristotle, in Otway, Euripides, and Sophocles, in contemporary playwrights and actors, in the theatre, in writing a tragedy, would have provided ample motive for an ode to Pity. And an 'Ode to Fear' follows naturally. It is clear that he is indebted for the verse form of the 'Ode to Evening' to the Wartons and, after forty lines, he makes the mistake of imitating a passage in Joseph's 'Ode to Fancy' (ll. 107–16) and commits himself to going through the seasons from Spring to Winter. It makes ending his poem satisfactorily very difficult. The unfinished poem 'Ye genii who, in secret state' looks very much like a potentially brilliant version of Joseph's 'Ode to a Lady who

[1] See E. L. Hart, loc. cit.

[2] See Carver, op. cit., p. 101, and Lonsdale, p. 563. Collins's sister is said to have burned Collins's manuscripts after his death.

hates the Country'. Collins cannot have been unaware of the excitement produced by Richardson's *Pamela* in 1740, or of Charles Jervas's translation of *Don Quixote*, and Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, in 1742. Attention was certainly being turned to prose fiction, and, in Warburton's note in Jervas's volume, to the history of fiction from the Milesian tales, via Boccaccio, to Cervantes. His friend Joseph Warton spent two long evenings with Henry Fielding and his sister Sarah in October 1746, and talked about *Joseph Andrews*.[1] The claims and counterclaims as to which writer gave the most 'just representation of human manners', which was the most accurate observer of nature, would have suggested to Collins the subject of his ode 'The Manners'. At the time, the Wartons, Fielding himself, the poet Thomson, and later Sir John Hawkins and Sir Walter Scott, all thought of Le Sage's *Gil Blas* as a 'conception which has never been equalled in fictitious composition'.[2] Collins's reference to Le Sage in his poem is perfectly intelligible.

To suggest the occasion of a poem is not to say anything about what Collins made of the occasion. My point at the moment is merely to suggest that Collins's own interests, and the interests of those around him, provided him with topics on which to write. As one who could be described as 'entirely an Author' in 1744, it is not surprising if his poems show him thinking of tragedy, pastoral, prose fiction, and, of course, epic. Since, according to Gilbert White, Collins was 'passionately fond of music', and was clearly aware of the controversy between music as harmony and music as a stimulus of the passions, with its attendant problems of the writing of words for music, Collins would inevitably think of odes for music. But the epic, that 'greatest work which the mind of man is capable to perform',[3] was a daunting prospect to a young poet coming so late in the tradition. By the 1740s it was clear to all but the most insensitive that the epic poem could no longer be written, and that Milton had been the only English poet who had achieved success. However attractive Tasso and Spenser were, they were Gothic poets. Milton alone had combined the virtues of the chaste and learned worlds of Greece and Rome, with the imaginative daring of the Christian Middle Ages. Collins's 'Ode on the Poetical Character' is Collins's statement that Milton alone could write an epic

[1] Wooll, op. cit., p. 215.

[2] See Hawkins *Life of Johnson* (1787), p. 217; Wooll, op. cit., pp. 174 f.; Scott, *Lives of the Novelists* (edn. 1928), p. 259.

[3] Dryden, *Dedication of the Aeneis*, the opening sentence.

poem. But again the poem needed an occasion. In the issue of *The Museum* in which his Colonel Ross ode appeared, and only two pages before it, is an article by John Callander entitled 'Milton's Muse'.[1] Callander explains Milton's reference to his muse at the beginning of Book VII of *Paradise Lost*

> Before the Hills appear'd, or Fountain flow'd,
> Thou with Eternal Wisdom didst converse,
> Wisdom thy Sister.
> (*Paradise Lost*, vii. 8–10)

The explanation is in terms of the traditional interpretation of the account of Wisdom in *Proverbs*, 8 : 29–31, as this was related by theologians to the concept of Logos as Logos endiathetos and Logos prophorikos. Callander refers to Spenser's earlier use of the image of Sapience sitting in God's bosom, 'The sovereign Darling of the Deity' and explains Milton's invention of a female Muse out of the Logos prophorikos, that is, the Word of God that speaks to human beings (as opposed to the Logos endiathetos, the Word which is an attribute of God). This invention of Urania, Callander says, is particularly Greek. For Collins's epode, and particularly for the difficult part

> Long by the lov'd *Enthusiast* woo'd,
> Himself in some Diviner Mood,
> Retiring, sate with her alone,
> And plac'd her on his Saphire Throne. (ll. 30–3)

—that is for the central concept of Imagination as the attribute by which God created the universe *and* the human gift of creating poetry, presented as a female figure outside God, Callander provides all the relevant material. And this Greekish muse is Milton's. Callander even provides the Greek equivalent of the magic girdle as the symbol of inspiration, when he refers to Hesiod being presented with a sceptre of laurel by his Muse. What Collins made of Callander's material, and what he himself added to it, produced a poem that 'inspired and whirled' Coleridge 'along with greater agitations of enthusiasm than any the most impassioned scene in Schiller or Shakespeare'.[2] But I am sure

[1] *The Museum*, i. 210–12. Callander's commentary on Book I of *Paradise Lost* was later published in Glasgow in 1750. The remainder of his commentary is in manuscript. See E. R. Wasserman, 'Collins's "Ode on the Poetical Character" ', *ELH*, 34 (1967), 92–115.

[2] Coleridge to Thelwall, December 1796.

that Callander's article was the occasion that, by providing the central poetic material, provided the spark for the poem. If the 'Ode on the Poetical Character' had been written by Keats, I am sure that we should say that this marked a step forward in the poet's understanding of the possibilities open, or not open, to him. Indeed Keats uses the phrase 'Poetical Character' when he writes about the nature of his genius.

So far it is clear that Collins is a bookish young man, likely to be excited to write by someone else's poem or novel or article, or by talk about such things. He is too enthusiastic about the literature of the past to be seriously overawed by it. He is not afraid, he writes in November 1750, of choosing 'the ancient Tragedies' for his models, and boasts that he has 'only copied the most affecting passages in them'.[1] He is amused by the sort of critic whose taste for originality leads him to condemn the writers of the beginning of the century.

> And should my friend, who knew not Anna's age,
> So nicely judge the canvas on the page?
> Still should his thought, on some old model placed,
> Reject the Briton with so nice a taste?

He continues

> Go then, in all unsatisfied, complain
> Of Time's mistake in Waller's desperate strain,
> For ah, 'untimely cam'st thou forth', indeed,
> With whom originals alone succeed!

He knows the critical tradition of tracing all literature back to Homer, but cannot think that even Thomas Blackwell believes that Homer's works had no antecedents but were 'self-produced in one exhaustless heart'.[2] Collins is himself a highly original poet, but his originality is not sought after out of distaste for his immediate predecessors. He is original because he speaks in a voice that only he can use. But before I say more of this I should like to point to those poems which had their occasion in his response to the wars going on in Europe and in northern Britain in 1745 and 1746. It is characteristic of Collins that in the last lines of his that have survived he should be praising

[1] Lonsdale, p. 555. Collins's letter to William Hayes, November 1750.

[2] Ibid., pp. 546–7. Dr. Lonsdale places this poem early in 1744, before Collins caught the ideas of Akenside and the Wartons. I think it was written after the *Odes*. Akenside and the Wartons were busy using models in Greek literature, in Milton and Spenser.

Ptolemy, the patron of letters and founder of the great Library and Museum in Alexandria in the third century B.C.

> Then virtue owned one royal heart,
> For, loathing war, humanely wise,
> For all the sacred sons of art,
> He bade the dome of science rise.

'Loathing war, humanely wise'. The poets were strangely quiet about the human tragedy of the Jacobite rebellion. Only Collins spoke, and his poems were ignored. He longs for Peace, for Concord

> Before whose breathing Bosom's Balm,
> *Rage* drops his Steel, and Storms grow calm.

He asks for mercy for the rebel leaders, and he writes the 'sublime epitaph', 'How sleep the Brave'. In thinking of these poems I am reminded of Thomas Warton criticizing Cicero's defence of the poet in the *Pro Archia Poeta*. Cicero, says Warton, does not illustrate his subject by 'insisting on the higher utilities of poetry, its political nature, and its importance to society'.[1] Collins illustrates both these concerns, carrying home to men's imaginations the meaning of war, and giving men words to express imaginatively their collective grief. 'How sleep the Brave' enacts the mourning ritual, associating it with a spiritualized natural world, and with sanctified images of Honour and Freedom. The fictions soothe the grief—the soldiers are 'the Brave'; they do not die screaming, they 'sink to Rest'; and their distant, hurried graves are transformed to 'a sweeter sod Than Fancy's Feet have ever trod'. Only intense grief needs to be made bearable in this way.

Perhaps, as Johnson thought, Collins did not sufficiently cultivate sentiment. But what sentiments he has are right-minded, and he writes the sort of poem that is intended to carry his thoughts imaginatively home. He is serious-minded, scholarly, pedantic even; learned to the point of ostentation; but modest, full of urgent aspiration. He longs to create, he knows how to praise, he is generous-minded. His ideals may not be original but they are important—Mercy, Pity, Liberty, Patriotism, Simplicity, Friendship—'Loathing war, humanely wise'.

[1] Warton, *History* (1824), iv. 258. Collins quotes from the *Pro Archia Poeta* on the title-page of his *Persian Eclogues* in 1742, that poetry broadens the sympathies and enlightens the understanding.

It is difficult, when reading Collins, to shake our minds free of Wordsworth and Keats, of our awareness of their quest for subjects for poetry, of Wordsworth's

> We poets in our youth begin in gladness,
> But thereof comes in the end despondency and madness.

of Keats, in the 'Ode to Psyche', like Collins addressing a fervent poem about his poetic aspirations to a goddess, but unlike Collins taking his goddess from an existing pantheon. Keats, like Collins, uses the image of building a temple, but Keats's images from nature, which describe the temple, are externalizations of the inner processes of the mind.

> Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
> In some untrodden region of my mind,
> Where branched thoughts, new grown with
> pleasant pain,
> Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind.
> ...
> A rosy sanctuary will I dress
> With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain.
> ('Ode to Psyche', ll. 50–60)

Collins, in the 'Ode to Pity', is just as aware as Keats that the temple he is building is created within the mind, that its building and the adornment of its walls are images for the act of imaginative creation.

> Come, *Pity*, come, by Fancy's Aid,
> Ev'n now my Thoughts, relenting Maid,
> Thy Temple's Pride design:
> Its Southern Site, its Truth compleat
> Shall raise a wild Enthusiast Heat,
> In all who view the Shrine.
>
> There Picture's Toils shall well relate,
> How Chance, or hard involving Fate,
> O'er mortal Bliss prevail.
> The Buskin'd Muse shall near her stand,
> And sighing prompt her tender Hand,
> With each disastrous Tale.
> (ll. 25–36)
>
> Ev'n now my *Thoughts* relenting Maid,
> Thy Temple's Pride design.

For Collins, imaginative creation is an act of thought. The plays of Euripides are 'all the Griefs his Thought could frame';

simplicity is taught by Nature 'to breathe her genuine Thought', and asked to 'charm my sight and prompt my temperate thought'; 'each forceful Thought' proceeds from 'Nature boon'; when Collins withdraws to write he retires 'hence to thoughtful Cell / As *Fancy* breathes her potent spell'; the works of liberty are 'Beyond the Measure vast of Thought'; and God, seen as the Divine Poet, 'call'd with Thought to Birth / Yon tented Sky, this laughing Earth'. With Keats's 'branched thoughts' and 'wreath'd trellis of a working brain' in our minds, we are apt to be uneasy with Collins's sometimes rather stiff images for his creation. If he chooses a temple, as in the 'Ode to Pity', it sounds too much like his exhortation to painters in the 'Verses to Hanmer', to draw their subjects from the brilliantly visualized images of the poets. One is reminded of Collins's interest in Leo X, and doubtless of his imagination of Michelangelo and Raphael adorning the walls of the Vatican. The temple is too solid, not sufficiently suggestive. But it is characteristic of an eighteenth-century poet that his image for a created poem should be architectural,[1] and characteristic of Collins that his image is of building a temple. For him poems are associated with religion, with man devoting his energies and resources to making a visible symbol of his spiritual aspirations. In the 'Ode to Liberty' Collins is clearly delighted by his image of the temple of Liberty

> In *Gothic* Pride it seems to rise!
> Yet *Graecia*'s graceful Order's join.

We are expected to respond to the mingling of the two powerful concepts of liberty. In 'The Manners' the temple is replaced by a procession; in the 'Poetical Character' by natural description, drawing heavily on Milton to fuse together an image of the natural world, its significance as representing Milton's prelapsarian imagination, and its difficulty of access.

One of our problems with Collins is to understand the strong hold on him of the theory, derived from Longinus perhaps, that the 'use, the force and the excellence of language, certainly consists in raising clear, complete and circumstantial images, and in turning readers into spectators'.[2] His odes are full of such

[1] See Paul Fussell, *The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 189 f.

[2] See J. Warton, *Essay on Pope*, edn. 1806, ii. 160, and i. 51–2 *n* for an account of a friend who intended to have a passage from Dryden's St. Cecilia Ode painted on the wall of his salon, the painter needing only 'to substitute colours for words'.

images, full of circumstances and ready for the painter's hand.

> Thou who, amidst the deathful Field,
> By Godlike Chiefs alone beheld,
> Oft with thy Bosom bare art found,
> Pleading for him the Youth who sinks to Ground.
> ('Ode to Mercy', ll. 7–10)

What Collins needs, therefore, is a structure that will allow him to link such detailed pictures. And inevitably his chosen structure will dictate his syntax, and the kind of argument, if any, that he can conduct in the poem. One of his very original structures is the combination of part of the pattern of 'Il Penseroso' with the rhetorical forms of prayer. He begins the 'Ode to Pity' by committing himself to the form of prayer—'O thou'. It allows him to establish the imploring tone, to state the origin of his goddess (and I am sure that Collins felt that to be very Greek), to describe her function in the general human condition, to tie his account to the story of the good Samaritan and to Milton's account of the birth of Death and the expulsion from Paradise. And it is all done by careful choice of words—binding wounds with balmy hands, man's 'destin'd scene'—in a circumstantial image that is full of action.

> O Thou, the Friend of Man assign'd
> With balmy Hands his Wounds to bind,
> And charm his frantic Woe:
> When first *Distress* with Dagger keen
> Broke forth to waste his destin'd scene,
> His wild unsated Foe!

Continuing with the rhetoric of prayer he uses the formula known as obsecration, familiar from the Litany, where the suppliant begs for grace by virtue of the Acts of Christ, listing them in the form 'by thy holy Nativity and Circumcision, by thy baptism'. In this form of prayer the worshipper lists former deeds of the God as evidence that He has given man a surety that He can and will do what is asked. It is the basis of the wonderful prayer of Richard III found in his Book of Hours.[1] Collins uses it to introduce Euripides as an exemplar of the power of a poet to evoke Pity. But it is done in a form which identifies Euripides by a geographical soubriquet—'By Pella's

[1] See Pamela Tudor-Craig, *Richard III* (National Portrait Gallery, 1973), pp. 27, 96–7.

Bard'—and that completes the prayer—'Receive my humble Rite'. The next section of the poem, two more stanzas, allows him to characterize and praise Otway, getting his transition in terms of the geographical and temporal distance of ancient Greece from Collins's Sussex.

The last three stanzas pick up the prayer structure, as it is used in 'Il Penseroso', 'Come, Pity, come'. They are filled with a description of the temple that Collins will build to her in his mind. He is pushed by his awareness of 'Il Penseroso' into an ending that sounds too unstrenuous.

> There let me oft, retir'd by Day,
> In Dreams of Passion melt away,
> Allowed with Thee to dwell:
> There waste the mournful Lamp of Night,
> Till, Virgin, Thou again delight
> To hear a *British* Shell!

The poetic diction of the last word now makes the last line sound ludicrous. But Collins from the start of the poem has been aware that he is not merely speaking of his own literary ambitions. He is speaking of Britain's need for a poet who can create, as Euripides and Otway did for their societies, dramatic poems which embody human griefs, the eternal distress to which fallen man is subject, and thereby to arouse that emotion, Pity, without which no man can call himself human. To experience Pity in face of suffering is to exist in that kind of poem that civilized society is. We cannot always depend on the art of earlier ages to supply the sustaining, humanizing, civilizing experiences that are fostered by poets.

Collins, in the *Odes*, clearly writes as one who longs to be the poet who can provide what he feels that society needs. In the 'Ode to Liberty' *he* is the 'New *Alcaeus*, Fancy-blest', rousing the youth of England to love and defend Liberty and to welcome her to 'Britain's ravaged Shore'. In the 'Ode occasion'd by the Death of Mr. Thomson' (Collins was the only poet, except Shenstone, to write on this theme) the landscape is made dearer by the recollection of Thomson, and reminds all sensitive men of the dead poet and friend. Thomson is seen as the patriotic Briton, and at the end of the poem it is all imaginative patriots who muse and weep over the grave of their Druid of 'Vales and Wild Woods'. For Collins's voice is a public voice. His concept of the poet is of a public figure, speaking to men about what most concerns them, and being a civilizing agent by his power to convey significant attitudes into the imaginations of men.

We read the poems incorrectly if we fail to recognize that Collins is concerned with the need for poets to interpret human experiences and to enrich them. The Odes are manifestos expressing both his own poetic aspirations, and his awareness that society needs poets. Pity is not simply an emotion aroused by tragic poets, it is, as Dryden said, 'the noblest and most god-like of moral virtues', essential to fallen man. Collins is aware of this in his opening stanza, and implies that each generation needs its poets to enable them to understand the human condition, 'How Chance, or hard involving Fate, O'er mortal Bliss prevail'. The 'Ode to Fear' is aware of fear in the real world, the phantoms 'who prompt to Deeds accurs'd the Mind', the 'Wounds' and 'Wrecks' of Nature, 'Vengeance', 'the Blood of Sorrow', 'Rape and Murder', 'drowning Sea-men's Cries'. Simplicity is not only an aesthetic ideal; in the 'real' world too it is necessary to disdain 'the Wealth of Art', and its poet must convey this ideal to 'all thy Sons, O Nature'. In the war poems Collins calls on the 'Forms Divine, ye Laureate Band' to write in such a way that men's imaginations are turned again to seek Concord in their ravaged society.

Dr. Johnson gives the impression of Collins as a young man heating his brain by 'flights of imagination which pass the bounds of nature', loving 'fairies, genii, giants and monsters'. Certainly Collins longed for a spiritualized natural world, to which man can relate imaginatively. He could see that Tasso, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton lived when that was possible. He could see that a Scottish poet might still draw on accepted beliefs and sustain them—'Let thy sweet muse the rural faith sustain'. Collins is urging Home to devote himself to the needs of *his* society. But Collins uses very little of popular superstitions outside the Ode to John Home. If he mentions ghosts, it is with the apologetic 'as Cottage-Maids believe' ('Ode to Fear', l. 60). His strangeness lies in the prayerful manner in which he addresses the goddesses he creates from abstract concepts. Crabb Robinson records a conversation with a Mr. Newton in 1809 when Newton declared 'with vehemence that Collins's Odes were blasphemous on account of the application to allegorical or mythological beings of the language used of the true God'.[1] He was undoubtedly thinking of such things as the use of the obsecration to pattern out a 'progress' of prose fiction in 'The Manners'.[2]

[1] *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers*, ed. Edith J. Morley (1938), i. 14.

[2] I have discussed this in my *Select Poems of Gray and Collins* (1967), pp. 124–5.

These things are less likely to disturb the modern reader than Collins's use of Spenserian archaisms, his uneasy control of syntax, his excessive experimentation with alliteration, assonance, consonance, and rhyme. When he decides to write a lyric in unrhymed verse, the 'Ode to Evening', he knows that he needs a discipline to hold him firm. So he begins

> If ought of Oaten Stop or Pastoral Song
> May hope, O pensive Eve, to soothe thine Ear.

The deliberate repetition—if ought/of oat; stop/or p; hope/O pen; sive/Eve; soothe/thine—at least shows that Collins was working hard. They are the only two lines of Collins that everybody remembers. The Wartons were trying it as well, Thomas beginning his poem 'The Suicide'

> Beneath the beech, whose branches bare,
> Smit with the lightning's livid glare.

Poor Collins's lines are, said Johnson, 'clogged and impeded with clusters of consonants', and indeed he does not avoid what is common in English, such clashes as 'mournful Lamps', 'British shell', 'appall'd th' unreal scene'. But then Pope, when patterning a couplet, will produce

> See Nature hastes her earliest wreaths to bring
> With all the incense of the breathing spring.
> ('Messiah', ll. 23–4)

If Collins is often unsuccessful in his experiments with word patterns,[1] at least he is showing the right kind of interest, as he is when he tries various verse forms, in couplets, stanzas, and Pindarics.

But after 1750 all the experimenting and concerned thinking and writing go silent. The poems that interest us now are the handful written in 1746, and the two written in 1749. The grand total is only twenty poems and eleven fragments. In his last nine years we hear of him travelling to France, drinking too much, confined in an asylum, visiting Oxford, meeting Johnson in Islington, living with his sister in Chichester, where the Wartons visit him, and, towards the end, raving much and making great moanings.[2] Our last view of him is of a man with only one book, but that the best, listening to the servant girl

[1] For discussion of the awareness of vowel patterning in Keats see Leigh Hunt's *Autobiography*, ch. 16, and W. J. Bate, *John Keats*, 1967, pp. 414 f. See also Ants Oras, 'Spenser and Milton: some Parallels and Contrasts in the Handling of Sound', in *Sound and Poetry*, ed. Northrop Frye, New York, 1956, pp. 109 f.

[2] P. L. Carver, op. cit., p. 176.

reading the twenty-seventh chapter of Genesis. The nature of Collins's long illness I do not know. But, as I suggested earlier, I think that he continued to be interested in 'very rare and valuable curiosities' and to 'speak kindly of Leo X'. His poems had certainly fallen on stony ground during his lifetime; it was John Langhorne's enthusiastic edition of them in 1765 that started the interest in the poetry of William Collins. What we must avoid is reading into his physical illness after 1750 a response to his failure to find a public. He is interesting because he is a young poet of the 1740s with a powerful lyric gift and an intense religious sense that could find no satisfaction in entering the Church. Like Christopher Smart, he insists that we pray with him in public. If we had the sensitivity of Crabb Robinson's Mr. Newton we would be shocked—if not by his blasphemies, at least by the intensity and fervour with which he asks us to feel the importance of the poet in society. The attraction of Pope Leo X for Collins was not accidental. For Leo was prodigal in his patronage of poets and artists, in his awareness that literature and art mattered. When Thomas Warton finished his two long chapters on the Revival of Learning in his *History of English Poetry*,[1] he makes it clear that what he has just been celebrating is the birth of 'good sense, good taste and good criticism', but the death of poetry—the introduction of a 'colder magic and a tamer mythology', method in composition, and 'that bane of invention, IMITATION'.[2] The writings of William Collins suggest to me that he was not entirely a Wartonian. I think he would have applauded Leo when, in granting permission to print the newly found Tacitus, he said 'that the great writers were a rule of life and a consolation in misfortune'. Collins was a friend of Samuel Johnson, as well as of the Wartons. He early recognized that

> Toil builds on Toil, and Age on Age improves,

but that in poetry alone history shows that there is no pattern of progress.

> The Muse alone unequal dealt her Rage,
> And grac'd with noblest Pomp her earliest Stage.
> ('Verses to Hanmer', ll. 31–2)

What his study of the age of Leo X, that is, of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, showed him, was that the revival

[1] Warton, *History of English Poetry* (edn. 1824), iii. 233–86.
[2] Ibid. 285.

of an earlier literature, enthusiastically encouraged, had produced a revival of creativity in poetry, painting, and architecture. Out of that revival had come the poets he most admired —Tasso, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton. It could be done again. The revival would come this time as a result of the restoration to men's consciousness of the simple, natural poetry and drama of the Greeks—and in this belief Akenside and the Wartons agreed. It had after all been the discovery of Greek after the fall of Constantinople that sparked off the revival under Leo X. At least, this was the belief until our own day. And it would come by a rediscovery of the poets and painters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Thomas Warton and Thomas Percy would have added the medieval romances to the list. It is, like the revival under Leo X, unashamedly scholarly and antiquarian. Collins welcomed an edition of Shakespeare, a reprint of Fairfax's Tasso, and doubtless was pleased by the editions of Milton with their learned notes, and Thomas Warton's *Observations on the Faerie Queene* (1754). His own library of sixteenth-century books must have been interesting. Collins longs to take part in this revival both as poet and as scholar.

That Collins's interest is in literature as a public activity, as a thing with a 'political nature', of 'importance to society' is instanced by his concern with drama and the theatre. His letter of 1747 shows that he was closely involved with the theatrical world. Like the great romantic poets later, he felt that drama was the greatest hope. Like them he was aware that so far he could write only lyrics. But at least the ode for music was a public experience in which poet and musician shared with an audience. Four years after the volume of *Odes* he was writing an ode for Music, about the Grecian Theatre.

After the *Odes Descriptive and Allegorical*, so far as we know, he did not again write odes descriptive and allegorical. Partly, perhaps, because they were not appreciated. But partly too, in all probability, because this phase of his poetic development was over. Before the *Odes* he had written pastorals and a verse epistle. It must have been galling to him to think that these juvenilia were the only poems to be easily reprinted. But the odes themselves show that he was becoming aware of literary possibilities beyond the ode.

His most ambitious poem is 'The Passions: An Ode for Music', which he put last in his volume. It is more ambitious in kind, it puts him in competition with Dryden (and, later in

the century, some critics thought, successfully), it asked for public performance, and it required evidence not only of prosodic virtuosity, but also of an understanding of human passions. Like Hume,[1] Collins knows that what is needed is not novelty but 'simplicity and nature', what the Greeks had had. The poem, like many of the other odes, is a manifesto.

> O bid our vain Endeavours cease,
> Revive the just Designs of *Greece*,
> Return in all thy simple State!
> Confirm the Tales Her Sons relate!

It was, however, his awareness that the bookish and antiquarian nature of his programme must be combined with an understanding of the contemporary world for which he was legislating, that produced 'The Manners: An Ode'. The form of the titles of these last two odes suggest that they stand apart from the others. In 'The Manners' he is more closely tied to 'Il Penseroso' for structure than in any other poem. But then, this is the only poem in which he is saying 'Farewell' to part of his previous literary doctrine, and welcoming a newly realized element. The first part of the poem is a witty and fully understood repudiation of Plato and the Stoics, of the Platonic view that knowledge is of Ideas, to be obtained by the Soul unhampered by the body and its sense-perceptions, and of the Platonic and Stoic view that man's task is to banish the passions from his life. Collins chooses words which show that he has a full understanding of Plato's attitude to the division of the Soul's faculties, the derogatory attitude to 'observation', the uneasy placing of the poet in society.[2] His 'Ode on the Poetical Character' had been based on a Platonic attitude which, he now sees, brings with it the implications that he is now recognizing and repudiating. In place of this he now welcomes a mind stocked with the materials gained from social observation and study of human nature.

> Youth of the quick uncheated sight,
> Thy Walks, *Observance*, more invite!
> O Thou, who lov'st the ampler Range,
> Where Life's wide Prospects round thee change,

[1] See David Hume's essay 'Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing', in *Essays Moral and Political* (1741–2).

[2] See the notes in my edition of *Selected Poems of Gray and Collins* (1967), pp. 193–5.

And with her mingling Sons ally'd,
Throw'st the prattling Page aside:
To me in Converse sweet impart,
To read in Man the Native Heart,
To learn, where Science sure is found,
From Nature as she lives around.

('The Manners', ll. 19–28)

Johnson, in the fourth *Rambler* essay, provides a gloss on this when he says that 'modern fiction' must be 'conducted nearly by the rules of comic poetry', a task requiring the experience that 'must arise from general converse and accurate observation of the living world'. A few months before Johnson, in 1749, Fielding had written

> 'Come, Experience, long conversant with the wise, the good, the learned, the polite. Nor with them only, but with every kind of character, from the minister at his levee, to the bailiff in his sponging-house . . . From thee only can the manners of mankind be known; to which the recluse pedant, however great his parts or extensive his learning may be, hath ever been a stranger'.[1]

Fielding here is almost writing a précis of Collins's poem, and the examples he gives are the ones Collins uses, Cervantes and Le Sage.

It is common to suggest that 'The Manners' was written on coming down from Oxford in 1744 and is therefore earlier than the other odes. I think that it is in fact an allegorical and descriptive account of a literary position that Collins moved towards at the end of his brief period of ode-writing. He saw that the literary and cultural revival could take a new direction, into the area of comic prose fiction.[2] He lacked the energy of Fielding to pursue the possibilities of the 'comic epic poem in prose', but he was aware of it. It is completely in character that our last glimpse of the poet Collins should be of him listening not to a Greek story but to a Hebrew one—the story of Isaac deceived into giving his blessing to Jacob instead of

[1] Fielding, *Tom Jones*, xiii. 1.

[2] Thomas Warton, having discussed 'allegorical personages' in medieval French and Italian poetry, in classical poets and Milton, ends the first volume of his *History*, 'As knowledge and learning increase, poetry begins to deal less in imagination: and these fantastic beings give way to real manners and living characters' (edn. 1824, ii. 304).

Esau, of Esau's grief and planned revenge, and of Rebecca's ruse to save her son Jacob. It is a tale that combines a knowledge of manners and passions, that arouses pity and fear, that has all the simplicity and naturalness of the Greeks. And it does all this without a single reference to a popular superstition.