

# A NOTE ON WILLIAM COLLINS' THEORY OF ART

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## I

Among William Collins' literary works we find none that he declares to be his theory of art, but his poetical writings, which amount to no more than one hundred pages, contain an unexpected number of pieces of poetics or theories of art. For example, in the preface of *The Persian Eclogues* (1742), his maiden work, and in *An Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands of Scotland* (1749, pub. 1788) he suggests that his object is to search for fresh poetical subjects against the poetry which was prevalent in the period. Further, in *Verses humbly address'd to Sir Thomas Hanmer* (1743) which he dedicated to Hanmer, the statesman and editor of the Shakespeare's works, Collins narrates his particular historical view of western literature.

The most important of all his writings on poetry and art, however, are those poems on literary and artistic subjects in *Odes on Several Descriptive and Allegoric Subjects* (1746). The odes, twelve in number, consist of those that deal with literary and artistic subjects and of those with political and patriotic subjects. To the former category belong *Ode to Pity* and *Ode to Fear*, which deal with the Aristotelian tragic passions, *Ode to Simplicity* in which the poet considers simplicity to be the ideal style of art, *Ode on the Poetical Character* where he admires the Miltonic imaginative power as the creative force of poetry, and *The Manners*, *An Ode* in which he bids farewell to the scholastic career and advocates the need of observing the manners and customs of the world. *The Passions: An Ode for Music* was intended to be recited with musical accompaniment and describes the personified passions, such as anger, despair, hope, melancholy, etc., each playing its own particular musical instrument. Some critics and scholars say that even *Ode to Evening* belongs to the literary category because, in it, Collins prays to the goddess of Evening to let him succeed in composing a pastoral poem.

What possessed Collins to write on literature and art so often? First, let us see his way of treating these subjects.

The first part (Strophe) of *Ode to Fear* is as follows:—

Thou, to whom the World unknown  
With all its shadowy Shapes is shown;  
Who see'st appall'd th' unreal Scene,  
While Fancy lifts the Veil between:

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Ah *Fear*! Ah frantic *Fear*!

I see, I see Thee near.

I know thy hurried Step, thy haggard Eye!

Like Thee I start, like Thee disorder'd fly,

For lo what *Monsters* in thy Train appear!

*Danger*, whose Limbs of Giant Mold

What mortal Eye can fix'd behold?

Who stalks his Round, an hideous Form,

Howling amidst the Midnight Storm,

Or throws him on the ridgy Steep

Of some loose hanging Rock to sleep:

And with him thousand *Phantom*s join'd,

Who prompt to Deeds accurs'd the Mind:

And those, the *Fiends*, who near allied,

O'er Nature's Wounds, and Wrecks preside;

Whilst *Vengeance*, in the lurid Air,

Lifts her red Arm, expos'd and bare:

On whom that rav'ning Brood of Fate,<sup>1</sup>

Who lap the Blood of Sorrow, wait;

Who, *Fear*, this ghastly Train can see,

And look not madly wild, like Thee?

The theme of this Pindaric ode is, as was mentioned before, not the feeling that we experience in ordinary life, but that feeling which is given catharsis by the tragedy. In the strophe quoted above, Collins describes the appearance of the Goddess of fear and her Train, and then in the second part (Epode)—which will be quoted afterwards—he explains how the spirit of fear has maintained its existence since the age of Sophocles and Aeschylus in the old Greece, and in the last part (Antistrophe) the poet imagines the haunted cave where the mad Nymph dwells, praying at the end that the Goddess may “teach him but once like him (Shakespeare) to feel”.

This Goddess of fear is not a mere personification of an idea, but a real existence for which the poet seems to imagine a concrete and solid image. Present-day readers find it difficult to appreciate the image as it is obscure, and yet what Collins wants to describe is clear enough. The feeling of fear into which Collins is moved on reading tragedies is so strong as to overwhelm him into sheer oblivion of all the realities of life, and the poet considers the feeling as a supernatural and mystic power and adores the sentiment almost as the object of pagan faith. The same thing can be said about “pity” as the counterpart of “fear”, and “fancy” in the *Ode on the Poetical Character*. However, the ideal beauty that Collins adores most deeply must be “simplicity” in *Ode to Simplicity*.

<sup>1</sup> Alluding to the *Electra* of Sophocles (Collins' own note).

O thou by *Nature* taught,  
 To breathe her genuine Thought,  
 In Numbers warmly pure, and sweetly strong:  
 Who first on Mountains wild,  
 In *Fancy* loveliest Child,  
 Thy Babe, or *Pleasure's*, nurs'd the Powers of Song!

Thou, who with Hermit Heart  
 Disdain'st the Wealth of Art,  
 And Gauds, and pageant Weeds, and trailing Pall:  
 But com'st a decent Maid  
 In *Attic* Robe array'd,  
 O chaste unboastful Nymph, to Thee I call!  
 (1 — 12)

The meaning of "simplicity" is not easy to comprehend. In fact critics and scholars disagree as to what it means. J.H. Fowler<sup>2</sup> says it means "sincerity", while O.F. Sigworth<sup>3</sup> asserts that it indicates "form". Anyway, judging from the above-quoted passage, we can safely assume that Collins meant by that word a concise, restrained style; a symbolical method of expression by which we could imply deep thoughts in simple images, the best example of which we find in Greek art. It is just this simple and symbolical expression that Collins aims at in his *Odes*.

We may safely guess from such passionate way of adoring tragic feelings and ideal beauty that Collins is a man who in early youth was completely captivated by the charm of works of art and literature. The solid, almost too realistic dream that literature renders, or the pure feelings which run with music, or the complete form of beauty which paintings represent; these works of art, and the ideal beauty which underwent strict selection and was in perfect order overwhelmed the actual realities of nature and life around the poet, enrapturing him by a single blow. That Collins had a profound appreciation and knowledge in music and paintings as well as in literature is obvious enough judging from the above-mentioned *The Passions; an Ode for Music* and *William Collins. Drafts and Fragments of Verse*<sup>4</sup> which was edited by J.S. Cunningham in 1956. Again, J.H. Hagstrum, in *The Sister Arts*,<sup>5</sup> traces the origin of Collins' pictorial imagery in the works of Guido Reni, seventeenth century Italian painter.

In short, it seems that when Collins was writing these odes, only the beauty of works of art induced him to write poetry because the aesthetic experience was far more actual than any other in daily life. He had nothing more to express. True in the *Odes*, he sang on such political and patriotic subjects as "peace", "mercy" and "How Sleep the Brave", but these odes, with the exception of one or two, are based on emotion less intense than those on art.

<sup>2</sup> J.H. Fowler: *Notes to the Golden Treasury*, 1929, Macmillan.

<sup>3</sup> Oliver F. Sigworth: *William Collins*, 1965, Twayne.

<sup>4</sup> J.S. Cunningham: *William Collins. Drafts and Fragments of Verse*, 1956, Oxford U.P.

<sup>5</sup> J.H. Hagstrum: *The Sister Arts*, 1958, The Univ. of Chicago Press.

## II

The main themes of the poetry of Pope and Dr. Johnson, representative poets of the middle part of the eighteenth century, were generally didactic or satiric; in other words, they were based upon moral values. Historically speaking, therefore, Collins' theory of poetry was quite epoch-making as it asserts the independence of the value of beauty as against the moral value. This is a literary event far more important in the history of English literature than such an indication that Collins is one of the forerunners of English romanticism.

John Keats, Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde follow Collins as apostles of beauty who were possessed by the ideal beauty of art and became less interested in the actual realities of life. Compared with Keats' attitude toward beauty as shown in *Ode to a Nightingale* or *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Collins' is characteristically historical, searching for the principles of beauty in the tradition of literature. In *Ode to Fear* and other odes on ideal beauty, he describes how those spirits of beauty have lived through the long history since the ancient Greece. Let me quote the Epode of *Ode to Fear*.

In earliest *Grece* to Thee with partial Choice,  
The Grief-full Muse address her infant Tongue;  
The Maids and Matrons, on her awful Voice,  
Silent and pale in wild Amazement hung.

Yet He, the Bard<sup>6</sup> who first invok'd thy Name,  
Disdain'd in *Marathon* its Pow'r to feel:  
For not alone he nurs'd the Poet's flame,  
But reach'd from Virtue's Hand the Patriot's Steel.

But who is He whom later Garlands grace,  
Who left a-while o'er *Hybla's* Dews to rove,  
With trembling Eyes thy dreary Steps to trace,  
Where Thou and *Furies* shar'd the baleful Grove?

Wrapt in thy cloudy Veil th' *Incestuous Queen*<sup>7</sup>  
Sigh'd the sad Call<sup>8</sup> her Son and Husband hear'd,  
When once alone it broke the silent Scene,  
And He the Wretch of *Thebes* no more appear'd.

O *Fear*, I know Thee by my throbbing Heart,  
Thy with'ring Pow'r inspir'd each mournful Line,  
Tho' gentle *Pity* claim her mingled Part,  
Yet all the Thunders of the Scene are thine!

<sup>6</sup> Aeschylus (Collins' own note).

<sup>7</sup> Jocasta (*ibid.*).

<sup>8</sup> See the Oedipus of Colon. of Sophocles. (*ibid.*).

Keats is also historical in dealing with the ancient Greek urn, calling it "a sylvan historian", in order to maintain the immortality of beauty; but his recognition of beauty concerns more about his senses and imagination, catching the delicate figures on the urn and rendering them into such vivid images as "for ever panting, and for ever young", or "heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter." Collins is far more insistently inquiring into history. Why?

We have to remember what poetical expressions meant to the eighteenth century English readers. As to the question whether or not the senses, feelings, or thoughts of human beings are common to one another or different from one another; in other words, whether the human nature is uniform or individual; the answers are divided. These two ways of thinking, however, are not truly in opposition to each other; and if we might use the common metaphor of an iceberg, the greater part of it, that is the common part, is hidden under the surface of the sea, while the small individual part stands out and is conspicuous. It is the trend of the age that emphasizes either part. The important thing is that the English civilization in the eighteenth century is founded on the belief in the universality of human nature. Here let me touch upon a similar aspect of old Japanese civilization. At least before Meiji era, the belief in the uniformity of human nature seems to have been so strong in almost every field of art. For instance, in Tanka and Haiku poetry as well as in Noh and Kabuki plays, the poets' and the players' main attitude was to follow the predecessors' imagery and acting. The poetry of Bashō, one of the most distinguished Haiku poets, could never be appreciated without understanding the poet's will to abandon himself first to the deep truths which had been established by a long series of his predecessors.

*furuike ya*  
*kawazu tobikomu*  
*mizuno oto*

The ancient pond  
A frog leaps in  
The sound of the water.

*shizukasa ya*  
*iwa ni shimiuru*  
*semi no koe*

Such stillness—  
The cries of cicadas  
Sink into the rocks.<sup>9</sup>

In these celebrated Haiku poems, see how Bashō first of all adapts himself to the eternal element of nature by using the long established images of the ancient pond and stillness of the mountain rocks.

Now back to the Augustan age of English literature, Pope says in one of his letters:

"Whatever is very good sense must have been common sense in all times." And consequently his principle of poetry writing may be said to be condensed in the famous couplet, if we put poetry in place of wit;

"True wit is nature to advantage dress't,  
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> translated by Donald Keene.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Pope: *An Essay on Criticism*, II, 296-7.

It was this regard to the universal truth that caused the poetry of the age to be full of essays on man, satires and didactic discourses and also of the translations, adaptations and imitations of classics. As for style, such techniques as personifications and abstract for concrete were in vogue. The esteem for, or rather the emphasis on universality on the part of Pope and Johnson were, as mentioned before, concerned with moral or ethical values. Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, for example, does not deal with the problem of beauty, but preaches the art of living for the critic.

Collins, therefore, had to assert the independent value of beauty against the universality of that moral value. He must have thought that the pursuit of the ideal beauty in history was an effective method to insist on the universality of beauty as well as those techniques as personifications and abstractions. What he wanted to say is this: that beauty did not exist for Collins alone, but it was an eternal and universal truth that had been constant throughout the long literary history since the ancient Greece. As stated before, the *Odes* contain such odes on the political and patriotic subjects as "peace", "mercy", "How Sleep the Brave". These subjects were the ones that were popular during the period and had already been dealt with by many other poets, thus being guaranteed their acceptance at that time. It may be inferred that Collins wanted to assert the universality of beauty all the more effectively by arranging the beauty odes along side of those political ones.