

John Churton Collins: The Critic as Pundit and Controversialist

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John Churton Collins (1848-1908) is a figure long obscured by conflicting reputations. A combative critic and exacting reviewer, his savage onslaught on Gosse's scholarship and mockery of Swinburne's critical abilities, not to mention his supposed questioning of Tennyson's originality, brought him lasting notoriety in the literary world. His victims' friends caricatured him as an embittered individual, envious of others' success and vindictive, brutal, and ungrateful to boot, in that Swinburne and Gosse were former friends. The result of all this was that by the late 1880s he was being loaded with satirical labels like one of Pope's dunces: "the louse on the locks of literature" (Tennyson and possibly Gosse), "Shirten Collars" (certainly Gosse), "Random Tearem" (*Oxford Magazine*), "the Timon of Critics" (Arthur Symonds), and "the demon mole" (Richard Le Gallienne).

In contrast, however, for many he was more Jekyll than Hyde. Important figures such as Benjamin Jowett, Henry Morley, W.J. Courthope, F.J. Furnivall, Henry Craik, Leslie Stephen, Andrew Lang, and Edward Dowden praised his work and wrote glowing references for him. The biography written by his son soon after his death also celebrated his sincerity and courage and the kindness, modesty, and good humor appreciated by many colleagues and students (L.C. Collins, *Life*, hereafter cited as *Life*). However, despite these tributes, his notoriety if anything grew more lurid with time. Thus Phyllis Grosskurth in her 1960s article, "Churton Collins: Scourge of the late Victorians," refers to his "paranoiac envy and irascibility" and "ferocious intensity" (257,

268). D.J. Palmer, while recognizing Collins' role in promoting English studies at Oxford, accuses him of "ignorance and prejudice" and speaks of his "bellicose invectives" (86, 93). John Gross goes further, talking of "a severely disturbed personality" and a "brooding assassin," before lamely dismissing him as "a mere irritable chalkdusty pedagogue" (176, 177), while Ann Thwaite in her 1980s biography of his victim Edmund Gosse has him down as "a fanatic and a pedant" (278). "Scourge," "assassin," "fanatic" – Collins the mad professor was clearly beyond objective consideration.

Later accounts have done him more justice by stressing his achievements rather than his supposed malevolence,¹ but misunderstandings about his significance persist. Valentine Cunningham, for example, sees him as the "the first self-conscious and fully professional scholar-critic in England," a representative of a new English studies "that we can recognize as very like our own" (73-74). But this assertion needs qualifying. With contemporaries such as David Masson, George Saintsbury, and W.P. Ker, he was hardly the first professional scholar-critic in England, and if he led the campaign to reform English studies there was little "new" about his ideas: he had conservative notions about the canon and the ranking of writers and, unlike say A.C. Bradley or R.G. Moulton, showed little interest in theory. His ideal critic was Longinus, who combined the Collinsian virtues of technical expertise, a strong dislike of sophistry and novelty, and a lively enthusiasm for the greatest poets of the past (Collins, "Longinus"). Thus, rather than encourage a new specialism demanding innovative approaches and methods, he aimed to revive the traditional virtues of humane education in relation to English literature and classics. Where he went further than others of his time, influenced by his dual role as scholar-critic and popular educator, was in his conviction that literary studies in the university, while advancing scholarly knowledge, should be in contact with the wider cultural life of the nation and function as a center exercising a beneficial influence on literary education and critical standards in general.

Collins' career was a more than usual mix of highs and lows. He was willful, too honest for his own good, and throughout his life, despite his energy and resolve, suffered from a deep sense of insecurity about his status and prospects. He lost his father early and was brought up by a wealthy uncle (John Churton), who sent him first to King Edward's School, Birmingham, and then on to Balliol College, Oxford (1868-72) with a view to ordination. Collins however soon rejected this idea, indulged his literary interests, posed as a young aesthete, impressed his friends with his astonishing memory, and with his "charming air of enthusiasm and of joy in life" reminded Andrew Lang of Will Ladislav in *Middlemarch* (*Life* 17). Collins, the young Ladislav, took the easy path at Balliol: he studied Law and History, rather than the more rigorous "Greats" (Classics), did insufficient work and drifted to a second-class degree.² Nonetheless, on the positive side, Benjamin Jowett fostered his admiration for Greek literature and civilization, while T.H. Green, his College tutor, impressed on him the value of earnest self-improvement and social responsibility and the idea that ethical development was more important than intellectual training. Collins' later philosophy of life and work clearly reflected Green's influence: he dedicated himself to missions Green would have approved, and despite his cultural pessimism, kept alive a Greenian view of a future improved by education.

After quarrelling with his uncle, Collins left Oxford for London intent on a literary career, but had to scrape by at first with hack journalism and coaching candidates for Civil Service examinations. Things looked up when he began friendships with Gosse and Swinburne, the latter being particularly valuable to him because he shared Collins' enthusiasm for seventeenth-century literature and introduced him to leading literary figures, editors, and publishers. Collins' edition of *The Plays and Poems of Cyril Tourneur* (dedicated to Swinburne) appeared in 1878, followed by *The Poems of Lord Herbert of Cherbury* (1881). Between 1878 and 1883, he wrote on Dryden, Bolingbroke, and Swift for the *Quarterly Review* and on Aulus Gellius, Menander, Voltaire, and

Tennyson for the *Cornhill*, all this work demonstrating scholarship spiced with strong opinions. Saintsbury praised the Dryden essay – “not merely one of the best things Mr. Collins has done, but one of the best on the subject” (179) – while Swinburne admired the Bolingbroke study: “Macaulay could not have made a more vivid and striking figure of him” (qtd. in *Life* 113). Much later T.S. Eliot said that Collins’ introduction to the Tourneur edition remained “the most penetrating interpretation of Tourneur that has been written” (189). The only dissenter was Tennyson, who found himself classed as an “imitative” poet by someone he considered a pedantic bookworm (see Tennyson, *Letters* 3:240).

Collins, however, soon had to readjust his priorities. He married in 1878 and from 1880 to 1907, to support his family (of eventually seven children), labored on an epic scale for the London Society for the Extension of University Teaching, averaging around twenty lectures on English literature a week during term time. His literary research had to be managed in tandem with this. Though a university professorship was his ambition – he made unsuccessful applications to Oxford, London, and Edinburgh during this time – Collins quickly became one of the London Society’s star lecturers: enthusiastic, amazingly erudite, an excellent performer without notes, popular with students, always in demand at different centers and well-regarded enough to lecture in the United States and Germany (*Life* 61-73). As an important spokesman for the Extension Movement, he energetically promoted the case for literary education both as an agency of general enlightenment not guaranteed by mere literacy and as a stabilizing force in a world of divisive social and cultural change. From this time on, nearly all his writing was influenced in both manner and content by his pedagogic concerns.

Up to the early 1880s Collins was close to Swinburne. He enjoyed his company, listened to his poetry recitals, gave his opinion of Swinburne’s poems in progress and admired him as a poet and “a most lovable human soul.” Swinburne welcomed Collins’ sympathy with his work, often deferred to his scholarship, and lavished praise on his various productions (*Life* 49-60). While this relationship was ideal for

Collins the literary man, as an Extension teacher he soon found the Swinburnian "aesthetic" conflicting with a pedagogic need to view literature instrumentally. The quotidian concerns of teaching were the appreciation and historical understanding of literature, but for Collins, influenced by Carlyle and Arnold, its moral evaluation mattered more. Poetry was not exempt from this and its moral power, which critics such as A.C. Bradley relegated to an "ulterior value" (Bradley 4-5), for Collins was of primary importance. He was therefore increasingly offended by Swinburne's apparent indifference to "the soundness or unsoundness of the metaphysic and ethic of poetry" and accused him (along with Pater) of caring only about form (Collins, *Essays* 103-4).

As Collins saw it, the constant danger was "the disastrous separation of aesthetic from ethic and metaphysic" (a statement Swinburne probably would have put the other way round). The great poets from Sophocles to Wordsworth, if supreme artists, were finally to be valued for the "profundity, purity, and comprehensiveness" of their insight into metaphysical and ethical questions and (more debatably) for the sustaining "guidance, illumination and solace" they transmitted to readers across history. Similarly, lesser poets needed valuing not merely in terms of aesthetic appeal but for the soundness of their "criticism of life." For the neo-Arnoldian Collins, this meant, for example, downgrading Keats – "the very Lorelei of modern poetry" – whose "bewitching" expressiveness had encouraged the worst excesses of aestheticism and false ideas of poetic value. The benefit to proponents of this ethically focused approach was obvious. English teachers were often regarded as mere "instructors" concerned only with the routine literary and historical matters required for examination purposes, but in giving attention to issues of interpretation and ethical value they could elevate the importance of their own role and (challengingly) claim poetry to be "the chief medium not merely of aesthetic but of religious and moral discipline" (Collins, *Studies* 227, 285, 291).

By the mid-1880s, intent on his pedagogic mission, Collins had finally become exasperated by Swinburne's aestheticism, his wildly

inconsistent judgments and hyperbolic style, and his arrogant assumption that poets were better critics than Extension lecturers. He now saw Arnold and Swinburne as opposing types of critics, the one lucid, measured and precise, the eye firmly on the object, the other egotistical, volatile in opinion, and always blurring the boundaries between poetry and criticism. The one offered a model for teachers and critics (if not for polemicists), the other a recipe for disaster.

The last straw no doubt was Swinburne's two-part article "Wordsworth and Byron" in the *Nineteenth Century* in 1884. Here Swinburne slated (the earlier admired) Byron, attacked Matthew Arnold for paradox and inconsistency, ridiculed his "criticism of life" theory, and praised (rather than condemned) Keats for being "exclusively aesthetic" and "absolutely non-moral" (64-71). Any one of these opinions would have outraged Collins, and soon afterwards he swooped on Swinburne's faults in Nordau-like fashion. In the course of attacking the verbosity, hyperbole, and general incoherence of J.A. Symonds' *Shakspeare's Predecessors in the English Drama* (1884), he saw Swinburne and Symonds with their morbid delight in decomposing thought into "fantastic shapes," their cultivation of "every eccentricity" in "the repertory of vicious rhetoric" and their attempt to "out-Ossian Ossian in the tumid extravagance of their epithets and turns" as modern exponents of a degenerate style appearing periodically through the ages. Collins in his fervor almost parodies the pathology he is describing. Swinburne's lyric gifts, he further insisted, were the worst qualifications for sound criticism:

Criticism is with him neither a process of analysis nor a process of interpretation but a "lyrical cry." Canons and principles, criteria and standards, he has none. [...] What he sees in one light in one mood he sees in another light in another mood. He is, in truth, as inconsistent as he is intemperate, as dogmatic as he is whimsical – the very Zimri of criticism. (Collins, "Shakspeare's" 333-36)

Swinburne's verbal acrobatics might have delighted literary gatherings at the Pines, but in cold print they represented an anarchic threat to the rational debate Collins' literary and pedagogic career depended on.

If the "morbid" graphomania of Symonds and Swinburne was bad enough as a critical model, even more damaging was the dilettantism of Edmund Gosse, Collins' former friend now despised as a literary socialite. Gosse's *From Shakespeare to Pope: An Inquiry into the Causes and Phenomena of the Rise of Classical Poetry in England* (1885) had been delivered as the Clark lectures at Cambridge and was widely praised for its fluency and charm.³ To Collins' more probing eye, however, it was superficial, inaccurate, critically inept, and an insult to all those like himself doing their best to instruct the nation in English literature. Noting the publisher (Cambridge University Press) and the pseudo-scientific subtitle, he declared the book a disturbing symptom of "the present condition of current literature," and with a profusion of examples accused Gosse of simulating knowledge of books he had not read, confusing names, titles and dates, making statements which "swarm with errors and absurdities" and poor literary judgments, being ignorant of "the commonest facts of history and biography," lacking the necessary "classical learning" for his subject, and displaying an extraordinary self-complacency about his scholarly defects (Collins, "English Literature" 289-329). In this critical demolition, of course, a glaring contrast was established between Gosse's incompetence and Collins' own "professional" expertise.

The severity of the review, a brilliant replay of Macaulay on Croker, gained Gosse much sympathy and Collins much opprobrium (Thwaite 276-97). But if there was a personal element to it, for Collins the dedicated English teacher the chief concern was the Cambridge approval of the error-strewn amateurism of Gosse's lectures, indicating an alarming Oxbridge indifference to scholarly standards in the case of his own subject. In his view a "work analogous to the work which stands at the head of this article would, we believe, in any other department of learning and culture, be impossible. One tithe of its blunders and

absurdities would have ruined instantly a book treating of Greek or Roman poetry, or discussing some point in modern history” (Collins, “English Literature” 328). If both universities were at fault here, Collins’ emotional and intellectual attachment to Oxford made it the main focus of a polemic against the universities’ failure to treat English literature as seriously as other disciplines.

Collins’ grievance here probably began at Balliol where his wide reading in English literature was useless for examination purposes. It was powerfully reactivated in 1885 when, supported by Leslie Stephen (former editor of the *Cornhill*) and William Smith (editor of the *Quarterly*), and the President of the London Extension Society (G.J. Goschen), he applied (along with Gosse, Dowden, Saintsbury, and A.C. Bradley) for the new Merton Chair of English Language and Literature at Oxford. This professorship, it was hoped by many, would help raise the status of English literature in an academic world where philology and Anglo-Saxon were normally seen as the serious face of English studies, and the rest of it mere “chatter about Shelley.”⁴ Oxford, however, wanted a “specialist” not a literary factotum and appointed the philologist A.S. Napier, who favored an English School with an early language bias. Refusing to take this as final, Collins mounted a campaign by way of the *Pall Mall Gazette*,⁵ denouncing philology as an arid specialism and demanding a new School linking English and classical literature. To the irritation of the University, he gathered the opinions of dozens of eminent people (including Gladstone, the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Morley, J.A. Froude, Matthew Arnold, Jowett, Pater, William Morris, and J.A. Symonds) and received, bar a few dissenters, broad approval for his proposal.⁶ Institutional deadlock at Oxford, however, delayed a final decision on the English School question until the 1890s.

Collins fired off several excellent articles on the subject, collected in *The Study of English Literature* (1891), which shrewdly expanded the issue to the state of literary education nationwide. He attacked Oxford (and less directly Cambridge) for being responsible for English teaching in schools and colleges through its various administrative bodies and

examination system while remaining indifferent to the unenlightened quality of the instruction often provided (57-61). In adult education (Collins' field) things were more promising but it was still difficult to find enough "satisfactory teachers" (v). Reform was urgently needed and Oxford had to revitalize literary studies through a School of English Literature, where the humanizing value of the subject would be realized in relation to history, ethics, and aesthetics, not philology. For example, in the case of Shakespeare, instead of the focus on the textual minutiae, sources, grammar, and etymology favored by editors and philologists, Collins recommended investigating such things as the psychology of the characters, Shakespeare's ethics and theology, the structure and style of the plays, and the similarities and differences between Shakespeare and Sophocles (43-50). He claimed this approach, together with a study of critical principles, would benefit the national culture at large. Properly trained graduates with "enlarged minds," "awakened literary sympathies," and "cultivated tastes" (67) would take their humane ideals into teaching, journalism, and publishing, banishing Gradgrind from the classroom and the aberrations of a Swinburne or a Gosse from criticism.

Though the English School when finally set up in 1893 defiantly reflected philological rather than literary interests, Collins' book was acclaimed for its "vigorous and fascinating" style and its "scholarly handling" of the theme.⁷ Not least it helped turn a parochial Oxford issue into a national argument about literary studies, favoring literature over philology in the longer run (*cf.* Palmer ch. 6, Kearney ch. 5, and Bacon). Collins' proposals gave shape to the arguments prioritizing literary education in two lectures delivered by Arnold in 1882 – "A Speech at Eton" and "Literature and Science" – reiterating the humanizing potential of English literature and aiming to establish an influential center for literary education nationwide. In Wendell Harris's words, "Arnold had long before forged the weapons necessary to win the battle for an Oxford School of English Literature" (8) and had it been set up it might have functioned – such was Collins' hope – as the university equivalent of an Arnoldian Academy. Arnold himself, however, had

doubts about this, as Collins discovered when he wrote to him for support.

At first Arnold seemed encouraging. He told Collins he liked his ideas and his work on Bolingbroke and sent him a copy of his own article on Sainte-Beuve, “the father and master of us all.” Practically, however, he offered nothing, saying that while he favored adding some English authors to the Oxford classical syllabuses, he was skeptical about a new School of Literature. Oxford, he said, had seen too many experiments recently and he had “no confidence in those who at the Universities regulate degrees and honours.” This aside, he clearly disliked Collins’ use of Gosse as a target: as he warned him in his first letter – maybe regretting that he had supported Gosse’s application for the Cambridge post – “I am unwilling to appear in a question which is mixed up with the question of the merits of Mr Gosse” (Arnold, *Letters* 6:213, 215-16, 233-34, 245-46). Collins quickly turned on the timid disciple of Sainte-Beuve. In a letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, signed “University Extension Lecturer,” he wrote of Arnold:

For the last twenty years he has figured as the apostle of culture; he has been dinning into our ears that we are Philistines; he has been bewailing the degradation of current literature, he has been groaning over our insensibility to what is excellent in art and criticism, but when there is a chance of aiding a movement which, if successful, will go far to remedy what he deplores, he prefers to fold his arms and talk about “lost causes” when he is trifling, and “instincts of self-preservation in humanity” when he is eloquent. (Collins, Letter 11-12)

Collins thereafter judged Arnold deficient in character, lacking conviction, and “not made of the stuff out of which Reformers are made” (L.C. Collins, *Posthumous Essays* 172), though he continued to admire him as a proponent of a humane literary education.

Along with many classically educated contributors to the debate, Collins was keen to link English studies and classical literature.

Pragmatically the case for linking them was that it would boost the academic credentials of "English literature," weaken the dominance of the Anglo-Saxonists (the philologists Collins detested), and, with luck, bring new life to classical studies. Pedagogically it was based on the contentious idea that when reading the best in English literature (especially poetry) "we find ourselves at every turn, and at almost every step, in the presence of the classics" thus making comparative study essential (Collins, *Study* 85). For Collins it was unthinkable that a student would gain an English degree not knowing how Spenser, Milton, Wordsworth, and Shelley had been influenced by Platonism or how Aristotle was the key to understanding Shakespeare.⁸ While English writers needed to be studied in relation to various historical contexts, the classical one counted most for Collins, and if the constant harking back to classical sources made the study of English literature as dependent on classics for its value and status as other approaches in English studies were on philology, he was more than happy with this. The idea of a fully independent English studies was not on his agenda.

In pursuit of his claim for classical influence, Collins sometimes indulged in wishful thinking (Shakespeare), sometimes made out a convincing case (Tennyson). In "Shakespeare as a Classical Scholar" (*Studies in Shakespeare* 1-95) he went much further than most contemporaries in making improbable claims for Shakespeare's learning. Ingeniously finding scores of close parallels between lines from his plays and those of the Greek dramatists, he argued that Shakespeare could well have studied them in the original Greek. But, as he finally had to concede, nothing was certain: many of the parallels might have been mere coincidences and others the result of Shakespeare's use of Latin or English translations. Besides, as J.M. Robertson pointed out, in making such bold claims Collins was playing into the hands of the Baconians he despised. If the plays were *that* indebted to Greek drama then they were probably written by somebody else (Robertson 304).

He was on firmer ground with *Illustrations of Tennyson* (1891), the book version of articles published earlier in the *Cornhill* magazine as "A

New Study of Tennyson.” Tennyson, unlike Shakespeare, was well-read in classical poetry and echoes of it were therefore likely his own. In fact, as Collins demonstrated in staggering detail, Tennyson, despite some “qualities of original genius,” appeared to have done little else but adapt earlier poetry to his own purposes. Not that he was a plagiarist, simply a gifted “imitative” poet paying tribute to his great predecessors much as other essentially imitative poets, for example Virgil, Horace, Tasso, and Gray, had done in their times. Moreover, Tennyson’s “wondrous assimilative skill” gave his poetry an extra appeal for the well-schooled reader. If its “intrinsic beauties” delighted ordinary readers, it had an added fascination for the scholar in the countless “niceties of adaptation, allusion and expression” involved in the borrowing which showed Tennyson’s artistry to advantage. Tennyson was therefore a true “classic” and deserved the same scholarly attention as Virgil and the others (2-8; cf. Pattison, ch. 1).

The book was hailed as “a very subtle and suggestive piece of criticism” and “a credit to English scholarship,”⁹ though “subtle” was hardly the word for it. In fact, as Richard Le Gallienne pointed out, it was more “commentary” than “criticism,” with limited analysis of the precise nature and quality of the borrowings (19-28). Despite this, and its loose handling of key terms such as “borrowing,” “adaptation,” and “assimilation,” the book was a pioneering contribution to the study of literary influence which later scholars would develop and theorize more “subtly.” Equally important, in the context of the English studies debate and the competition between rival disciplines, it supported Collins’ claim that comparative literary studies had academic parity with philological ones, since demonstrating Tennyson’s borrowings from earlier poets (or Shakespeare’s debt to Greek drama) required scholarship and skills equal to anything the philologists could profess.

Though Saintsbury’s equal as a scholar, Collins never had the time to produce equivalents of his massive tomes, only shorter works such as *Jonathan Swift* (1893), *Essays and Studies* (1895), *Studies in Shakespeare* (1904), *Studies in Poetry and Criticism* (1905), *Voltaire*,

Montesquieu and Rousseau in England (1908).¹⁰ These were well received but there was often a caveat about his approach and style. A reviewer of his *Essays and Studies* said of him:

He has opinions and dares to give them uncompromising expression; he has energy; he has learning; he asserts authority; he maintains a tradition [...] but he treats his authors less as a lover than as a judge; he dreads extravagance of the emotions; he does not lie down to repose, to browse, to ruminate; he toils, investigates, accumulates, arranges, pronounces. (Anon. rev. of *Essays and Studies* 353-54)

Eschewing the "scientific" criticism of R.G. Moulton and the "impressionism" of Saintsbury, Collins continued the "judicial" tradition of critics such as Macaulay, whose forensic style he often copied. The critic's responsibility was to instruct and judge, not merely analyze or "ruminate," or, even worse, indulge in displays of sophistry and paradox. As his attacks on Symonds and Swinburne showed, he was anxious about deviations from critical norms and the emergence of new forms of personalist writing, which robbed criticism of its required authority and reduced it to "a loose record of personal impressions" (*Studies in Poetry* vii). As he said in one of his gloomier essays, this downward trend was such that, lacking "standards," "touchstones," "principles," and "knowledge," literary criticism now appeared "to be regarded as the one calling for which no equipment and no training are needed" (*Ephemera* 26). From this viewpoint, his own stress on the need for scholarly knowledge of the literary past and focus on the indebtedness of later to earlier writers were intended to shore up standards and continuities he saw dissolving around him and to reassert the authority of the educated critic.

In 1904 Collins was again rejected by Oxford but soon afterwards was gratefully snapped up by Birmingham University. There he found a sympathetic Professor of Classics in E.A. Sonnenschein and was able to set up versions of courses earlier rejected by Oxford and campaign for a

School of Journalism (*Life* 257-81). Despite a poor review of his edition of *The Plays and Poems of Robert Greene* (1905) (Greg), Collins seemed to thrive as a Professor at Birmingham, well respected by colleagues and popular with students. Tragically, however, in September 1908 he met his death by drowning while staying at Oulton Broad in Suffolk. The verdict was "Accidental Death," but judging from notes found in his pocket book there was also the suspicion of suicide.¹¹ Always overstretched and insecure, frequently disappointed in his ambitions, Collins perhaps came to see himself, like his heroes Demosthenes and Burke, wearing out his life for the public good, "leading forlorn hopes" and "fighting losing battles" (L.C. Collins, *Posthumous Essays* 50).

In fact he had real achievements to his name. The contemporary of W.P. Ker, Saintsbury, Bradley and Raleigh, Collins did more than any of these professors to advance the cause of literary education, whatever their contributions to scholarship. In effect he was the F.R. Leavis of his time: a fearless critic of the establishment and a tireless promoter of Arnoldian ideas. In a moving tribute to him, Ernest de Selincourt, his successor at Birmingham, praised Collins as a scholar and a leading campaigner for English literature at a time when few academics took it seriously (de Selincourt, "Study"). If things were different now he said, this owed much to Collins' efforts, concluding that, "In the history of the progress of education in the nineteenth century the name of John Churton Collins stood out as that of a pioneer, and no one who cared for our great national literature could fail to recognise the significance of his work." More than anyone else, Collins vitally energized the debate about humane education in late-Victorian universities, helped change the Cinderella status of English literature as an academic subject, and despite his excessive concern with classical influence, made proposals about the teaching of it which were adopted by later reformers looking to differentiate literary studies from philology. *The Study of English Literature* was widely cited both in Britain and the United States (Graff 77), and at Cambridge, minus the classical connection, said E.M.W. Tillyard, "might have served as the text for the principles on which the

English Tripos was founded in 1917. And indeed it had its influence, because [Mansfield] Forbes [the leading reformer of Cambridge English studies at this time] knew it and advertised its doctrines" (Tillyard 32). This wide approval for his ideas is often overlooked by Collins' modern depreciators (cf. Guy and Small 167-68).

The Study of English Literature is one book Collins should be remembered for; the other is the lively and pugnacious *Ephemera Critica* (1901). Collins' polemical reviews, mostly in the *Saturday Review*, were his most engaging writing. There he cemented his reputation as a late-Victorian sage striving for an Emersonian optimism against a Carlylean pessimism¹² and noted for his attacks on aestheticism, dilettantism, pedantry, and the general decline in literary standards. *Ephemera Critica*, a collection of these reviews, passes judgment on the work of many well-known critics of the day from George Saintsbury to Edmund Gosse to Richard Le Gallienne. With pedagogic correction and satirical wit, Gosse is given another dressing-down regarding his *Short History of Modern Literature* – "reckless generalizations, random assertions and the specious semblance of knowledge, erudition and authority" (132) – while, on a different tack, Saintsbury is rebuked for "the mingled coarseness, triviality and dogmatism of his tone, the audacious nonsense of his generalisations, and the offensive vulgarity of his diction and style" (109). Le Gallienne particularly riles Collins by asserting that all the good critic needs is the right temperament (154). Occasionally a good book (such as Sidney Lee's *Life of Shakespeare*) is held up as an inspiring contrast to the "slovenly and perfunctory work" and "plausible charlatanry and pretentious incompetence" of much contemporary criticism (211). Arthur Symonds crisply summed up the book when he said "nearly every essay is a brick thrown at somebody with great energy and a formidable sense of duty" (1004).

Collins' clashes with individuals, however, were nearly always about principles and standards and his "formidable sense of duty" was really a formidable sense of "responsibility" stemming from a concern with literary education on a wide front. Readers needed to be informed,

not duped, and critics therefore needed to meet appropriate standards of critical discourse. In Stein Haugom Olsen's words, "Churton Collins demanded accuracy, broad and deep knowledge of literature and the literary tradition, application of this knowledge in observation and interpretation, clarity of expression, and sound argumentation" (349). In the increasingly professionalized world of English studies after Collins' day, there was arguably a diminishing need for a book like *Ephmera Critica*; at the time, however, when academic criticism was still trying to separate itself from laxer kinds of impressionism such as Gosse's and Le Gallienne's, Collins' incisive and pulverizing reviews were a much-needed wake-up call for the emerging discipline of English studies and were anything but "ephemeral" in significance.

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Notes

¹ See for instance, Anthony Kearney, *The Louse on the Locks of Literature*; Valentine Cunningham, "Darke Conceits"; Alexandra Lawrie, *The Beginnings of University English*; Robert Dingley, "Coming Back for Seconds."

² Not a third-class degree (see Grosskurth 255 and Thwaite 174), and not in "Greats" (see Palmer 64). Collins probably avoided Greats because it involved more philosophy and history than literature.

³ To one reviewer it was like "good madeira wine from across the sea." ("Literary Duel" 1).

⁴ E.A. Freeman's phrase for English literary studies. Until 1893 English Literature at Oxford was only studied at Pass degree level.

⁵ From the mid-1880s Collins wrote on a regular basis for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, then under the editorship of W.T. Stead. Stead encouraged Collins' campaign and made the journal a forum for the Oxford debate.

⁶ Collins, *Study of English Literature*, ch. 6. Morris and Pater were among those keen to keep English literature out of academic hands; see "English Literature at the Universities" and "English at the Universities – IV."

⁷ Anon. Review, *University Extension Journal* (1892). See also Anon. Review, *Saturday Review* (1892) and Anon. Review, *Spectator* (1892).

⁸ See *The Study of English Literature* 154 and "Can English Literature Be Taught?" 653.

⁹ These reviews were posted in Collins' *Jonathan Swift*.

¹⁰ For an evaluation of some of these works, see Kearney 88-104 and 125-32.

¹¹ See obituary notices in *The Times* (16 September 1908), p. 11 and (18 September), p. 11. See also *Life* vii-viii and 282-94.

¹² For Collins' view of Carlyle and Emerson, see L.C. Collins, ed., *Posthumous Essays* 164-65.

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