When was the following credo written and by whom?

I believe, for the reasons already explained, that Belles Lettres are sinking deeper and deeper into degradation, that they are gradually passing out of the hands of their true representatives, and becoming almost the monopoly of their false representatives, and that the consequences of this cannot but be most disastrous to us as a nation, to our reputation in the World of Letters, to taste, to tone, to morals. It is surely a shame and a crime in any one, and more especially in men occupying positions of influence and authority to assist in the work of corruption.

Jonathan Swift? William Wordsworth? John Ruskin? F. R. Leavis? The credo contains sentiments that each of them on more than one occasion endorsed. But in fact these words were set down a hundred years ago, by a man of letters whose name a century later is scarcely known, even to academics in English studies. For John Churton Collins is one of the great secrets of belles lettres in English, a prophet without honor even in the writings of those – such as Leavis – who might have recognized him as a forebear.
and fellow spirit in the fight to make the criticism of literature a serious and valuable activity. The reasons why Collins has been buried so deep in the ranks of those forgotten should be inquired into.

Insofar as he is remembered, it is as an irascible, if well-equipped attacker of his contemporary men of letters. Foremost of these attacks is the one on Edmund Gosse, whose Cambridge Clark Lectures, published in book form as *From Shakespeare to Pope* (1885), Collins took to pieces as a tissue of factual error and incompetent judgments. The review begins famously: “That such a book as this should have been permitted to go forth to the world with the *imprimatur* of the University of Cambridge, affords matter for very grave reflection.” The forty pages to follow document the charge citing chapter and verse. And Collins provided similar dismantlings of what he called dilettantism – loose, impressionistic commentary on literary works – in books by John Addington Symonds, George Saintsbury, and other lesser-known belletrists. The attack on Gosse is understood to have provoked Gosse’s friend Alfred, Lord Tennyson – about whom Collins had already written essays that displeased Tennyson – to call him, picturesquely, “a Louse on the locks of Literature.” In fact as Christopher Ricks and later Gosse’s biographer Ann Thwaite have pointed out, Tennyson employed the far less picturesque “Jackass” by way of characterizing Collins.

Dilettantism was one half of what Collins saw as the besetting sin of literary studies; the other half was philology, the discipline that controlled those studies at Oxford and Cambridge. His plea for the detaching of literature as a legitimate subject of study from philology was forcefully and scornfully made in the first section of his three-part essay “English Literature at the Universities” (*Ephemera Critica*). Collins describes philology’s resistance to any attempt to widen and extend the audience for literature by making it a subject for “liberal” study. On the contrary, he says of philologists: “In their eyes the Universities are simply nurseries for esoteric specialists, and to talk of bringing them into touch with national life is, in their estimation, mere cant. Their attitude toward Literature, generally, is precisely that of the classical party toward our own Literature: they regard it simply as the concern of men of letters, journalists, dilettantes, and Extension lecturers.”
Collins admits that philology is a branch of learning “of immense importance” but also declares that as a science “it has no connection with Literature.” He believed that the “instincts and faculties” of the study of philology, compared to the student of literature, were radically dissimilar, and that until the study of literature became separated from philological investigation, it would lack integrity.

Collins himself was an extension lecturer, perhaps the busiest and most devoted of them who ever lived. In the appendixes to the *Life and Memoirs of John Churton Collins*, his son L. C. Collins tells us that his father began his career in the University Extension Society in 1880, continuing for twenty-seven years, by which time he had delivered more than three thousand lectures. He possessed, we are told, a remarkable memory for prose as well as verse and a flair for the dramatic, with the result that he was enormously popular and much in demand. L. C. Collins notes that “as his memory was so good, he was able to dispense for the most part with the use of his note-books, and on this account the lecture was rendered more pleasing for its air of ease and spontaneity; he displayed, too, a genuine and never lacking enthusiasm in his subject and this usually became infectious.” Yet for most of those twenty-seven years, despite repeated applications, Collins had no university post (he eventually received one at the University of Birmingham in 1905), which surely fueled his conviction that he was an outsider; while inside the universities lived philologists (and perhaps some dilettantes, too) resisting any attempt to open up the study of English to more systematically critical operations.

His hero was Matthew Arnold, whose great essay “The Study of Poetry” appeared the year Collins began work as an extension lecturer. But satiric urbanity of the sort Arnold deployed in that essay, when he treated John Dryden and Alexander Pope as classics of prose, rather than of poetry, from our “excellent and indispensable eighteenth century,” was not Collins’s usual style. Arnold could deftly and smoothly expose the awkwardness of Francis Newman’s translation of Homer, or the banalities of Mr. Roebuck and Sir Charles Adderley in the famous “Wragg is in custody” passage from “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time.” By contrast Collins’s attacks were the opposite of feline, and “urbane” would be scarcely the right adjective for their comportment.
Consider sentences from his evisceration of Gosse in *The Quarterly Review* in 1886:

There is not a chapter — nay, if we except the Appendices and index, it would be difficult to find five consecutive pages which do not swarm with errors and absurdities. And the peculiarity of Mr. Gosse’s errors is, that they cannot be classed among those to which even well-informed men are liable. They are not mere slips of the pen, they are not clerical and superficial, nor such as, casually arising, may be easily excised, but they are, to borrow a metaphor from medicine, local manifestations of constitutional mischief. The ignorance which Mr. Gosse displays of the simplest facts of Literature and History is sufficiently extraordinary, but the recklessness with which he exposes that ignorance transcends belief.

And he proceeds, damningly, to lay out the evidence.

The vigorous, no-holds-barred relentlessness with which Collins prosecuted his victims has been unfortunate for his reputation, insofar as when critics recognize his work at all it is to focus on its demonstrative excesses. Attention, rather than being paid to the truth or falsity of Collins’s charges, is directed at the psychology of the charger: thus Collins, rather than his victim, becomes the subject of analysis. For example, Phyllis Grosskurth, the biographer of John Addington Symonds, speaks of the “paranoiac envy and irascibility that characterized his [Collins’s] work.” Although she admits that Collins’s rebuttal to Gosse’s response to the attack on him was “far more specific about actual inaccuracies and incomparably better organized as a whole than Gosse’s effort,” we are left with the impression that Collins’s effort proceeded from motives somewhat dishonorable, certainly less than the “disinterested” criticism Arnold had called for. Ann Thwaite, in her biography of Gosse, goes even further along this line, admitting that Collins was quite right to list Gosse’s errors but also calling Collins “a fanatic and a pedant,” thereby undermining his worth.

In a similar vein, Grosskurth points to Collins’s demonstration of how much Tennyson’s poetry owed to his predecessors — how adept and inveterate a borrower was the poet — as a covert slur on Tennyson. She credits Collins’s “fantastic memory, his ability to
find allusions and parallels behind nearly every phrase of Tennyson’s.” But when she comes to Collins’s declaration that his tracing of allusion was “offered as commentaries on works which will take their place beside the masterpieces of Greek and Roman genius,” she finds that declaration to be “intoned sanctimoniously” and that what really happened was that “Collins had tasted blood.” The significant fact that Collins’s way of noting sources, allusions, indebtednesses to his predecessors in Tennyson’s poetry would be drawn upon and practiced in Christopher Ricks’s great edition of his works seems to go for nought – at least when compared to the analyzing and demoting of the less than worthy motives out of which Collins’s practice supposedly issued.

In *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*, John Gross has some pages on Collins that give a more sympathetic picture of his contribution. But Gross, too, is bothered, at least slightly, by what he calls Collins’s “licensed ferocity” as a critic. Gross admits that the errors Collins uncovered in other critics ought not to have been let pass and that “other reviewers in the same situation might well have delivered equally unfavorable verdicts.” But, Gross goes on to qualify, “he did bring to the task of demolition a peculiar intensity, which was over and above the call of scholarly duty, and which suggests the brooding assassin rather than the judge.” This is fair enough, yet leaves us to decide for ourselves just how attractive this peculiar intensity that goes beyond “the call of scholarly duty” remains for us today.

By drawing on his son’s memoir we can suggest the nature of Collins’s “intensity,” then observe it in the literary work of a critic whose legacy is richer and more various than the demolition jobs on his contemporaries for which he is mainly remembered. Everyone was in awe of his wonderful memory – “the greatest since Macaulay,” testified a Philadelphia host of Collins, who had been invited to lecture there in 1893 by the American Society for the Extension of University Teaching. He was not just good at quoting poems from memory, as his host, Mr. Miles, testified when Miles’s son asked Collins where he could find a good description of a great battle. “In Napier’s Peninsular War, Vittoria for instance,” was the answer. “Of course, Mr. Collins,’ I said *in jest*, ‘you can recite the whole of it?’ Whereupon, he reeled off fifteen pages of Napier
without a pause, or hesitation, to the great delight of the youthful Basil and all of us. He followed this, a little later, with the whole of Manzoni’s hymn to Napoleon, *in Italian!* Collins’s familiarity with languages was also phenomenal: he could read Greek, Latin, French, Spanish, Italian, and, in his later years, German. He was especially devoted to Italian and issued a vigorous protest when the civil service abolished it from its examinations on the grounds that it was too easy to “get up.” As for the Classics, his campaign to bring English and classical curricula into some kind of harmony went along with a number of practical suggestions in his *Study of English Literature*, in his edition of Matthew Arnold’s *Merope* along with Sophocles’ *Electra*, and in his posthumously published series of lectures, *Greek Influence on English Poetry*.

The intensity of Collins’s literary pursuits can be observed in the pattern of his daily activity. His son quotes from his father’s notebook: “Have just completed, 3 a.m. a respectable feat. I have carefully annotated the whole of Pope’s Essay on Criticism. I began it on Sunday midday, August 9th and have finished it at 3 a.m. on August 12th, 1896.” The 3 a.m. end to the workday was not an isolated instance. At one point he speaks of “the most frightfully laborious six weeks I have ever known,” in which he frequently worked sixteen or seventeen hours a day. In 1903, completing a month’s visit to Oxford, where he had been working on a long article on nineteenth-century American poets, he says he has avoided “deep depression” though has had “a good deal of the milder kind.” And he enumerates a typical day: “Always a plunge in the river at 8.30: then breakfast 9.15: work from 10.30 to 5 as a rule: then bicycle ride: then dinner 7.30: then rest: then work 9.30 to 3 a.m. nearly every day.” Even for a nineteenth-century man of letters, this must be extreme. Saintsbury, after all, had his wine cellar for diversion; whether Collins felt anything about wine is unrecorded. L. C. Collins tells us that his father cared nothing for the theater or for picture galleries and that he was especially bored “by music in any shape or form.” He did take an active interest in criminology, and he loved cemeteries, which, his son tells us, were always the first places he visited in a new town.

Although Collins was prey to depression throughout his life, his physical constitution was strong, and he scarcely missed a single one of the ten thousand or so lectures he delivered over his career.
The depressions, which could last for months, were inexplicable, and they came and went. His marriage seems to have been happy, though it is hard to see what sort of time he could have spent with his wife and the seven children she bore him. His death, under mysterious circumstances – his body was found in a dike in the English countryside, a bottle of sedatives nearby – could have been intentional or accidental, or some blurry combination. Although it can’t be proven by demonstration, he appears to have been an essentially solitary being in the midst of the domestic and educational society in which he was involved. An entry from his notebook suggests how he contrived to see himself in relation to other people, to society: he writes that our character seems to have been given us at birth (“what a man is that is he born”)

and that so far as the foundations of character are concerned, education has little or perhaps no weight. I cannot call to mind a single human being who has had the slightest influence on me. My intense love of literature was inspired by no one, encouraged by no one, influenced by no one. It awoke suddenly and spontaneously – my life, my deeper life, has been essentially and permanently solitary. At school, at College and since it has been quite apart from my surroundings.

This is really an extraordinary claim to make for oneself, with the italicized words pumping up the intensity, and it’s no wonder that such a man should fail to be rewarded in his attempts at public, institutional success. At the beginning of the last century, he launched a campaign to found a scholarship at Oxford for the comparative study of classical and English literature. He found a philanthropist named John Passmore Edwards who expressed interest in the project, then Collins solicited many letters from leading intellectuals in the culture (Arnold, Benjamin Jowett, William Gladstone, John Morley). Eventually the project did succeed – the money came through and the scholarship was accepted by Oxford. But at one point it looked as if the benefactor was pulling out, and Collins confided the following to his notebook; that it was “one more of the many illustrations of the ill-fortune which has pursued me through life”: “I have never succeeded in anything except as a lecturer, everything that I have essayed has broken down, even when there seemed every chance of my succeeding as here. Bitter
indeed has been the disappointment. I had set my heart on this and it seemed so likely to succeed.” It almost must have been difficult for him, after things righted themselves in this instance, to grant an exception to the blanket wailing over himself as a perfect failure in everything.

Yet Collins succeeded in the most important way a literary man can be said to succeed: he produced a substantial number of commentaries on poets and critics that are permanently valuable examples of intelligent criticism. And he provided a passionate, still-relevant example of a way of thinking about the study and teaching of literature. This is to make no claim for his endurance as someone whose writings will be consulted, looked up for critical insights: his books are out of print and will remain so. In a sense it could be argued that he really didn’t write books, but essays rather, which he then cobbled together into his most important volumes of criticism, Essays and Studies; Studies in Poetry and Criticism; Ephemerâ Critica. His biographical works — studies of Viscount Bolingbroke and Swift, an account of Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in England — are, though readable and clear-headed, perhaps the least original of his productions. But his work as an editor of texts, the plays of Cyril Tourneur (the introduction to which T. S. Eliot singled out for praise) and of Robert Greene (the editorial part of which was taken to task by a later scholar, W. W. Greg), were honorable projects that deserve at least mention. And his Clarendon Press editions, with introductions, of Thomas More’s Utopia and Philip Sidney’s Apologie for Poetry are elegant little monuments to memorable texts.

But his most original work consisted in the critical commentaries on subjects he cared about with his peculiar intensity, and in his splendid polemic, The Study of English Literature: A Plea for Its Recognition and Organization at the Universities. To take up the latter first: Collins argues that when literature has been recognized at all as a subject for teaching in the universities, it has been done in a spirit similar to that in which classics has been taught:

It has been regarded not as the expression of art and genius, but as mere material for the study of words, as mere pabulum for philology. All that constitutes its intrinsic value has been ignored. All that constitutes its value as a liberal study has
been ignored. Its masterpieces have been resolved into exercises in grammar, syntax and etymology. Its history has been resolved into a barren catalogue of names, works, and dates. No faculty but the faculty of memory has been called into play in studying it. That it should therefore have failed as an instrument of education is no more than might have been expected.

This passionate declaration, issued we must remember from a man who had been lecturing for eleven years in the university extension program; who had been attempting to demonstrate to non-university audiences all over England the “intrinsic value” of literary masterpieces; and who believed – as Arnold believed – that poetry was a criticism of life and that the task of literary criticism was to elucidate (in Arnold’s terms) how that poetry shows “a power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us as nothing else can.” The study of literature in the universities was instead an exercise in how not to do things: “We have absolutely no provision for systematic critical training,” declared Collins; the interpretation of literature, of “verbal analysis, analysis of form and style, analysis of sentiment, ethic, and thought,” was not being performed. Instead, philological investigation took its place. Collins’s strictures on philology, after he grants it a place in the academic groves, are pretty severely unqualified in their negative estimate:

It must not be confounded with Literature. . . . Up to the present time, it has, in consequence of this confusion, been allowed to fill a place in education altogether disproportionate to its insignificance as an instrument of culture. As an instrument of culture it ranks – it surely ranks – very low indeed. It certainly contributes nothing to the cultivation of the taste. It as certainly contributes nothing to the education of the emotions. The mind it neither enlarges, stimulates, nor refines. On the contrary, it too often induces or confirms that peculiar woodenness and opacity, that singular coarseness of feeling and purblindness of moral and intellectual vision, which has in all ages been characteristic of mere philologists.
He remembers suggesting to Mark Pattison, and receiving Pattison’s approval, that Pope’s lines from *Dunciad IV* should be inscribed over the doors of the classical schools:

Since man from beasts by Words is known
Words are man’s province, Words we teach alone.
When Reason doubtful, like the Samian letter,
Points us two ways, the narrower is the better.
Plac’d at the door of Learning, youth to guide,
We never suffer it to stand too wide. . . .
What so’er the talents, or how’er designed
We hang one jingling padlock on the mind.

Collins’s conviction that the philological study of literature frequently directs attention to “unprofitable topics” is substantiated by his quoting from a university “paper” on *Macbeth*, which consists of questions like the following (I am compressing them):

1. What reasons are there for believing that this play has been interpolated? Point out the parts probably interpolated.

2. What emendations have been proposed in the following passages? [There follow seven passages.]

5. Give the meanings and derivations of the following words. In what context do they appear?

7. Illustrate from the play important points of difference between Elizabethan and modern grammar.

Collins points out that the only mental faculty appealed to is that of memory and that nothing in the questions “indicates the existence of what constitutes the life and power of the work.” In like manner he adduces editions of Shakespeare and Milton from Oxford’s Clarendon Press that, solid though their scholarly editing is, insist on regarding the work as a monument to language merely; on dwelling “with tedious and unnecessary minuteness” on that which is of interest only to philologists and of confining themselves oppressively to these matters. As with the paper on *Macbeth*, Collins quotes from the editorial notes that accompany these editions.

Yet for all philology’s antiliberal pedantry, it is to Collins’s mind a lesser evil than dilettantism. One of philology’s arguments against “literary” rather than linguistic study of works was that it would too easily turn into vague, impressionistic remarks (“chat-
ter about Shelley”) testifying only to the professor’s or student’s pleasure or lack of it in a particular instance of art. How do you grade such “subjective” responses whose rightness or wrongness can’t be measured the way interpolations to Macbeth can? Collins himself worries about the matter, especially when the subject is lyric poetry, and he admits that the “spectacle” of a lecturer with one of Tennyson’s poems in hand (“Tears, Idle Tears,” or “Mari-
ana”) attempting to show “what is graceful, what is fanciful, what is pathetic,” would be “ludicrous and repulsive”; yet, he adds, anything can be ridiculed, and so long as the lecturer remembers that his task is “the interpretation of power and beauty as they reveal themselves in language” – so long as he remembers, with Arnold, that poetry is the criticism of life – he will be performing his proper function as a teacher, as a critic. (In an appendix to The Study of English Literature, Collins provides, under various headings – historical, comparative, critical – sample questions that a serious, “liberal” study of literature might involve.)

Decades later, in the essays gathered in Education and the Uni-

versity (especially “Literary Studies” and “A Sketch for an ‘English School’”), F. R. Leavis would expand on some of the ways a literary-critical training might be conducted. “It is plain that in the work of a properly ordered English School . . . the training of reading capacity has first place. By training of reading capacity I mean the training of perception, judgment and analytic skill commonly referred to as ‘practical criticism’ – or, rather, the training that ‘practical criticism’ ought to be.” By that time, with philology no longer so pre-eminent, Leavis took up arms against “literary history, as a matter of ‘facts about’ and accepted critical (or quasi-
critical) description and commentary.” Leavis called such history worthless unless the student could as a critic, as “an intelligent and discerning reader,” approach literature with a reading capacity trained in the practical criticism of language. Leavis was not given to generous recognition of his forebears in the fight to recognize “English” as a legitimate subject of study, but Collins deserves an important place among that number.

If Leavis should have given Collins a mention, so might have T. S. Eliot, who praised his introduction to the plays of Tourneur but appears not to have noticed how similar to Collins’s are his, Eliot’s, own strictures on impressionistic criticism. In the two
essays that open *The Sacred Wood*, “The Perfect Critic” and “Im-
perfect Critics,” Eliot was concerned to distinguish what he saw as
appropriate “objective” criticism from the more subjective sort
practiced by two of his predecessors, Algernon Charles Swinburne
and Arthur Symons. Eliot notes in Swinburne’s critical essays
important “faults of style” such as “the tumultuous outcry of ad-
jectives, the headstrong rush of undisciplined sentences” that are
“the index to the impatience and perhaps laziness of a disorderly
mind.” The resultant “blur” Eliot sees as continuous with Swin-
burne in his poetry. As for Symons, whose book on symbolist
poetry Eliot testified to having been influenced by, he is content to
give us his sensations about *Antony and Cleopatra* (“the most
wonderful, I think, of all Shakespeare’s plays”) without moving
beyond those sensations to generalization, analysis, construction —
to “ériger en lois ses impressions personnelles,” as Eliot liked to
quote from Rémy de Gourmont.

Thirty-five years previously, in “The Predecessors of Shake-
spere,” Collins gave his own accounts of those playwrights, but
first took to task John Addington Symonds — whose book on them
occasioned the essay — and Swinburne for the impressionistic ex-
cesses of their prose. Collins admits that Swinburne possessed a
“powerful and accurate memory,” but that is his sole qualifica-
tion as a critic (note the overlap with philology as also memory-
oriented):

His judgment is the sport sometimes of his emotions and
sometimes of his imagination. A work of art has the same
effect on Mr. Swinburne as objects fraught with hateful or
delightful associations have on persons with sensitive memo-
ries. The mind dwells not on the objects themselves, but on
what is accidentally recalled or accidentally suggested by
them. . . . Criticism is with him neither a process of analysis
nor a process of interpretation, but a “lyrical cry.” . . . What
seems to be Mr. Swinburne’s convictions are merely his tem-
porary impressions.

Collins finds a continuation of Swinburne’s hyperbole in Sym-
onds’s “wild and whirling verbiage, his plethora of extravagant
and frequently nauseous metaphor,” and he quotes a number of
passages where Symonds has even outdone his master in such
stylistic vices and deformations. Now of course – as with the
evisceration of Edmund Gosse – it is possible to see these adverse
reflections on Swinburne and Symonds solely as examples of Col-
lins’s destructive motives. (Especially with Swinburne, who had
encouraged and supported Collins in his editing of Tourneur, we
feel the feeding hand being bitten.) The alternative, one more
appreciative of Collins, is to see these attacks, like those Eliot
mounted decades later, as undertaken in order that stronger, more
telling critical operations might proceed – operations that both
Collins and Eliot practiced with impressive results.

As always seems to be the case with people who write about
Collins’s work, these pages have concentrated on his efforts as an
adversarial critic of bêtes noires like philology and impressionistic
criticism, and on some representative practitioners of them. What
to my knowledge no one has remarked about his achievement
overall are the number of pages devoted to “positive,” that is,
encomiastic, criticism of writers: Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden,
Lord Chesterfield, Wordsworth, George Crabbe, Lord Byron, Ar-
old, and others, including (surprisingly) nineteenth-century
American poets. The best of these show him operating in a man-
ner his master Arnold (with Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve in
mind) liked to call flexible and varied (ondoyant et diverse), com-
bing historical “placing” of the writer and his works with vig-
orous making of judgments on the relative virtues of those works
and of the writer’s rank compared to contemporaries and pre-
decessors. In the range and openness of his taste, he compares
favorably to Arnold, who (as Eliot noted in The Sacred Wood)
succumbed to the temptation “to put literature into the corner
until he cleaned up the whole country first.” Eliot wished that
Arnold had given us more judgments and analyses of particular
writers; for all of Collins’s absorption in the “idea” of how litera-
ture should properly be taught, he seized plenty of occasions for
exercising his more purely literary discriminations.

This is not to say that he doesn’t present limitations that we are
conscious of, from the standpoint of a century and more later. Two
of these are probably related. For all of Collins’s belief in the
analysis and interpretation of a poet’s words, he seldom comes
to particular grips with them the way his twentieth-century
successors – I. A. Richards, William Empson, Leavis, and the
American New Critics – have shown us can be exciting. He doesn’t attempt to enter into passages of poetry by describing (in words Arnold used in “The Study of Poetry”) their rhythm and movement. (In fact, Arnold didn’t do much of such “entering” himself, preferring to stay back and remain external to the poetry, even as he pronounced it sound or unsound, great or not so great.) Related to this absence in Collins is his tendency to substitute, for discussion of the poem’s language, an insistence on its soundness, its goodness as a moral statement. This tendency is particularly marked in the volume of essays his son published after Collins’s death – lectures, most of them, with plenty of passages quoted but too often simply affirmed as noble. The essay on Wordsworth, significantly titled “Wordsworth as a Teacher,” is one of his weaker efforts, consisting too frequently of such affirmations about various Wordsworthian passages of poetry. In these respects we can say, without complacency or finger-shaking, that Collins was of his age rather than ahead of it.

He never wrote better than in the four long essays published in *The Quarterly Review* between 1878 and 1892, which, along with a shorter one on Menander, were gathered to make up *Essays and Studies*, his best book. Along with the essay on Shakespeare’s predecessors, with its attack on Symonds, are ones on Dryden, Chesterfield, and Lewis Theobald – “The Porson of Shakespearian Criticism,” as Collins calls him in the essay’s title. In his book on Collins, Anthony Kearney speaks of his “tendentious” use of Dryden as a support for Collins’s own fight against the excesses of late Victorian impressionism in criticism. Tendentious or not – and the word didn’t occur to me as I read the essay – this ninety-page trip through Dryden’s life and major works is a triumph of clear-eyed criticism unafraid to make its preferences and judgments known. Its opening paragraph, running to nearly three pages, is a magisterial summary of Dryden’s “services” to literature, sentence after sentence of which begins “He had rescued,” “He had brought home to us,” “He had given us,” “He had shown us,” as we are moved through Dryden’s contributions in poetry and the criticism of poetry. Collins doesn’t offer a new “take” on Dryden; his essay is continuous with Walter Scott’s fine “Life” in his edition of Dryden, and with the accounts that were to follow by George Saints-
bury and Mark Van Doren (the latter precipitating Eliot’s essay of 1920). But the distinguishing touch of his readerly sensibility is always evident.

A single example must suffice: late in the essay he comes to discuss Dryden’s *Fables, Ancient and Modern*, and immediately tells us we must discriminate between the successes and failures of these translations. He finds Dryden to be essentially a “rhetorical” poet, and although Collins notes the lack of affinity between Dryden’s temperament and Virgil’s, he can with qualification praise Dryden’s “re-writing” of the *Aeneid* as substituting a “masterpiece of rhetoric for a masterpiece of poetry.” But such was not possible with Chaucer, where Dryden’s failure is, to Collins, egregious:

All Chaucer’s *naïveté*, simplicity, freshness, grace, pathos, humour, truth to nature and truth to life, all that attracts us in his temper, tone, and style, have not merely disappeared, but, what is much worse, have been represented by Drydenian equivalents. Where Chaucer is easy and natural with the easiness and naturalness of good breeding, Dryden is simply vulgar. It may be doubted whether there is a single touch of nature which Dryden has not missed or spoilt, or a single pathetic passage which he has not made ridiculous.

Illustrations follow, after which Collins names a number of “passages which admit of rhetorical treatment,” in which, by contrast, Dryden is extremely successful. What is worth noting here and characteristic in general of Collins’s criticism is the willingness to speak harshly about parts of a poet’s achievement that are unsatisfactory to the critic’s eyes and ears. These adverse judgments make more convincing the praising of other work by Dryden and make more telling the essay’s concluding salute to “the manifold energy of that vigorous and plastic genius, which added to our literature so much which is excellent and so much which is admirable.”

The distinction between the rhetorical and the truly “poetic” was an important one for Collins, and he uses it again in another of his best critical performances, “The Works of Lord Byron” (*Studies in Poetry and Criticism*). Singling out parts of the work where Byron’s rhetorical or “falsetto” note is most heard (the dramas, the
first two cantos of *Childe Harold*), he distinguishes them from the poems, or parts of poems, in which Byron is sincerely moved — in which he truly becomes Byron the poet:

It is when we compare the dramas with *The Vision of Judgment* and *Don Juan*, that we measure the distance between Byron the rhetorician and Byron the poet, between degrees of talent and the pure accent of genius. A large proportion, perhaps two-thirds, of Byron’s poetry resolves itself into the work of an extraordinarily gifted craftsman, with a rhetorical talent as brilliant and plastic as Dryden’s, working on the material furnished by an unusually wide experience of life, by sleepless observation, and by a marvelously assimilative and retentive memory, incessantly if desultorily adding to its store.

But in *The Vision of Judgment* and in *Don Juan* we have something that goes beyond talent and reveals “the true, full man,” reveals the “amazing versatility and dexterity of his genius for comedy and satire.” Collins’s account of Byron’s poetry, in its fullness and particular discriminations, supplies what Matthew Arnold, in his own essay on the poet, signally failed to give us, since Arnold was so busy comparing Byron to Wordsworth and Giacomo Leopardi that he managed never once in the entire essay to mention either *Don Juan* or *The Vision of Judgment*, those poems Collins rightly saw as the peak of Byron’s achievement.

In suggesting briefly the often invigorating character of Collins’s criticism (as well as the sheer reading pleasure of the sentences as he lays them out), I should mention his eighty-page survey of American poetry, “Poets and Poetry of America” (*Studies in Poetry and Criticism*). He opens it by claiming that American poetry is underestimated in England, and his essay, published in 1905, is the first serious attempt of an English critic to recognize and come to critical grip with poets across the water. In his survey Collins does, among other things, the following: he singles out Philip Freneau as someone whose too voluminous work nevertheless presents “a few flowers”; he praises William Cullen Bryant as America’s first poet of distinction, mentioning “Thanatopsis” and “To a Waterfowl” especially; he calls Ralph Waldo Emerson one of the greatest American poets but finds that claim best substanti-
ated in Emerson’s prose, since although the poetry is “absolutely original,” it frequently shows Emerson’s defective ear and unmusical blank verse. Collins anticipates Yvor Winters in having a good word to say for Jones Very, while he finds the more popular John Greenleaf Whittier deficient in “high poetic quality.” As for what are now called the Fireside Poets – Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and James Russell Lowell – Collins calls them “genial, polished, and most accomplished men,” but also judges that “from men so constituted and tempered great poetry we cannot hope to find.” Edgar Allan Poe, on the other hand, gives us a poetry that is both new and original, though his most famous poems are tours de force or “tuneful nonsense.” Emily Dickinson is faulted for being “in her jerky transcendentalism and strained style, too faithful a disciple of Emerson,” but Collins finds much real merit in her work. And Walt Whitman, a figure of “monstrous and ludicrous egotism” (see D. H. Lawrence’s essay soon to come), is also in his art an “astute showman,” able to “collect a crowd for a show which, in some respects is well worth seeing.”

Collins concludes his survey in a curious manner, pronouncing gloomily that “the future of American poetry is as dark as that of our own,” and although in 1905 it would have been understandable to have such thoughts about the mainly genteel American products appearing, it is of a piece with Collins’s inability to look at the future of literature with anything but low hopes. The few contemporary poets he wrote about – William Watson, Gerald Massey, Stephen Phillips – were hardly the bringers of a new style or point of view. Indeed it may be that as an omnivorous reader of everything – at least all the poetry and poetic drama – written before, say, 1885, Collins was a sufferer from the Burden of the Past. Knowing how much had been written and how much of it was good, he couldn’t imagine there was anything notable to come. At any rate he was not the man to discover what Leavis was to call “new bearings” in English or American poetry.

These judgments, culled from the American poetry survey, are produced not to prove Collins’s indisputable rightness as a critic of those poets but to suggest that, as is always the case, his judgments – however summary and undemonstrated through particular analysis – are worth considering, qualifying, amending. In a word, Collins is an interesting voice to have in the conversation.
And with respect to American poets, the conversation at least in England hadn’t proceeded very far by the beginning of the last century.

It would be unprofitable, and perhaps unnecessary, to take up for discussion various of Collins’s other essays: these pages have made, I hope, a case for his historical but also for his continuing value for us as a writer about literature. Instead I will close by quoting briefly from two of his best essays sentences which, ostensibly about the subject under examination, have also unmistakable application to the examiner. The first, longer one, is from his essay on Chesterfield, an impressive exercise in setting that writer in relation to Cicero, Jean de La Bruyère, François de La Rochefoucauld, and Voltaire and comparing him in intellectual honesty and moral candor to Montaigne and Swift. At a certain point in the essay, describing Chesterfield’s importance, his particular message and value, Collins puts him in the class of the work “of men out of touch and out of sympathy with their surroundings, separated by differences of character, temper, intellect from their fellows, viewing things with other eyes, having other thoughts, other feelings – aliens without being strangers.” He says that the judgments of these men provide the “tests of national life”: “They put to the proof its intellectual and moral currency. They call to account its creeds, its opinions, its sentiments, its manners, its fashions. For conventional touchstones and standards of their own, derived, it may be ideally from speculation, or derived, as is much more commonly the case, from those of other nations. . . . They are the upholders of the Ideal and of the Best.” If we substitute “national literature” for “national life,” Collins would qualify as one of these men; at least, the peculiar intensity of his prose in this passage, in conjunction with his self-born, self-created myth quoted earlier (“My intense love of literature has been inspired by no one, encouraged by no one, influenced by no one”), encourage us to think of him as an “alien” like the Chesterfield he is writing about.

A similar affection for the outsider who has been reviled, at least his achievement underappreciated, shines through in the conclusion to “The Porson of Shakespeare Criticism,” his convincing attempt to rehabilitate Lewis Theobald as a great textual critic of Shakespeare. Theobald, once of The Dunciad and a name there-
after dogged with the imputation of pedantry and obfuscation, is for Collins a hero, the first great editor of Shakespeare who provided a “settled text” that deserves the gratitude of humanity. Collins’s words about Theobald — “He belonged to a class of men who are or ought to be the peculiar care of the friends of learning” — serve well as Collins’s own epitaph.