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An Collins and the Life of Writing

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An Collins' volume of poems, *Divine Songs and Meditacions* (1653), is a spiritual autobiography containing lyrical analyses of affliction and recovery, theological commentary, complex self-representation, self-expression, and self-defense, praise of God, thoughtful meditations on daily experiences, and reflections on social/communal life and public events.[1] What I examine in this essay is the extent to which writing is a key reference point for these topics, a recurrent touchstone that is both a concrete and literal motif in itself, and a far-reaching multivalent and synecdochic figure. This is not, of course, entirely surprising or unprecedented. An integral part of the tradition of early to mid-seventeenth-century religious poetry is the conflation of problems of devotion and problems of writing devotional verse. But even with these precedents in mind, *Divine Songs and Meditacions* is remarkable for how the major and interrelated events of Collins' personal, social and political, and devotional life find significant and compelling form in her representations of the drama of writing.

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[1]For textual and background information, see An Collins, *Divine Songs and Meditacions*, ed. Sidney Gottlieb (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1996). All quotations from Collins are from this edition, cited by line numbers in the body of my essay. To date, the most extensive critical treatment of Collins may be found in W. Scott Howard, "Fantastic Surmise: Seventeenth-Century English Elegies, Elegiac Modes and the Historical Imagination from Donne to Philips." Diss. University of Washington, 1998. See especially chapter 4, "'With *Deborah* T'were Joy to Sing': Devotion, Dissent and the Quietist Prophecies of An Collins" (pp. 223-331).

I begin by surveying her various direct statements of the background and purposes of her writing, particularly early in the volume, where there is a certain defensiveness to her comments. Next, I trace how she examines in more detail the perils of self-representation and expression, and such issues as the legitimacy, difficulties, and consequences of speaking out. Here Collins is highly conscious of living a life of restraints on a variety of levels: as a woman forced (perhaps because of physical illness or disability) into retirement; as a sinful human being; and as a worshipper trying to live like a saint in a world that slanders and undermines holiness. Poetry—and especially poetry often centrally about poetry—helps her analyze and overcome these restraints. Her comments on writing not only present an index of her fluctuating sense of herself (female, afflicted, weak, physically vulnerable, and slandered, but vocal, resistant, and resourceful) and her calling: they also help relate her own distresses and consolations to the larger drama of a spiritual reformation still being enacted, still, in fact, being reformed.

Finally, in somewhat more extended analyses, I examine how these smaller and larger dramas coalesce in several key poems. Collins repeatedly affirms that she must emerge from the "private" into the "public" world and must take a stand on issues of broad social and devotional concern. In the course of telling her story she also focuses extensively on "history" and her immersion in an environment of insults and the apparent success of the ungodly, and she structures her volume so that poems of self-analysis, complaint, and careful self-presentation and construction lead up to a concluding sequence that shows how she achieves consolation and also, via bold topical allusion and commentary, envisions and participates in an even more far-reaching triumph of the godly. At the heart of this linked consolation and triumph is the exemplary act of writing.

The Art of Affliction

From the first words of *Divine Songs and Meditacions* we become aware of one of Collins' characteristic clusters of ideas and experiences. Details of personal affliction and alienation, recovery through a brave expressive "activity of spirit" supported by God, and the association of poetry with the "Truth" are elements of what we

might call the "masterplot" of the volume. The prose address to the "*Christian Reader*" tells a brief and remarkably uplifting story of how "I became affected to Poetry, insomuch that I proceeded to practise the same." That she is able to "practise" anything at all is no small accomplishment. She has been "restrained from bodily employments, suting with my disposicion, which enforced me to a retired Course of life." But "divine Providence," which gave her whatever emotional or physical disability that may be hinted at in these lines also gave her "inlargednesse of mind" and "enflamed [her] faculties." This compensatory inspiration, allows her to become a poet and the experience becomes written into her poetry in such a way that her poems may serve "for the benefit, and comfort of others. Cheifly for those Christians who are of disconsolat Spirits." She feels the consoling "manifestacion of Divine Truth" and also gives voice to it in practicing an art that is personally "most delightfull" and "pleasing" and also intrinsically charitable and gracious.

Not surprisingly, though, as she comments more extensively on the circumstances of her writing in the "Discourse, Songs and meditacions following," the activity of writing becomes more complex and problematical. "The Preface" begins with a versified retelling of the autobiographical parable of recovery associated with poetry sketched out in "To the Reader":

> *Being through weakness to the house confin'd,*
> *My mentall powers seeming long to sleep,*
> *were summond up, by want of wakeing mind*
> *Their wonted course of exercise to keep,*
> *And not to waste themselves in slumber deep;*
> *Though no work can bee so from error kept*
> *But some against it boldly will except:*
>
> *Yet sith it was my morning exercise*
> *The fruit of intellectuals to vent,*
> *In Songs or counterfets of Poesies,*
> *And haveing therein found no small content,*
> *To keep that course my thoughts are therfore bent*[.]
> (ll. 1-12)[2]

[2]"The Preface" is printed in italics in the original, which I have retained in all my quotations from the poem here.

This literal description of herself as a resolved meditative poet, whose poems are integrated into an important routine of observation, analysis, expression, and healing that structures her life as well as her verse, is the foundation of more complex figurative descriptions that characterize the later poems in the volume. Even in "The Preface," she soon turns to the figurative mode, and repeats the story of her verse and "what God still for my Soule hath wrought" (l. 98) in a way that previews the lyrics to come:

> *When Clouds of Melancholy over-cast*
> *My heart, sustaining heavinesse therby,*
> *But long that sad condicion would not last*
> *For soon the Spring of Light would blessedly*
> *Send forth a beam, for helps discovery,*
> *Then dark discomforts would give place to joy,*
> *Which not the World could give or quite destroy.*
>
> *So sorrow serv'd but as springing raine*
> *To ripen fruits, indowments of the minde,*
> *Who thereby did abillitie attaine*
> *To send forth flowers, of so rare a kinde,*
> *Which wither not by force of Sun or Winde:*
> *Retaining vertue in their operacions,*
> *Which are the matter of those Meditacions.* (ll. 99-112)

The association of flowers, gardens, light, lasting fruitful "*indowments of the minde*," poetic inspiration, and a healing action that is both a mundane natural process and a holy miracle composes a kind of resonant and allusive shorthand embedded in some of her most important poems, including "A Song expressing their Happinesse who have Communion with Christ," "A Song shewing the Mercies of God to his people," "The Winter of my infancy," and "Excessive worldly Greife."

"The Preface" offers a generally upbeat description of her calling to poetry, supported by God's direct intervention in her life and also his example: he too is a writer, expressing and revealing himself in a constant (and imitable) process of signification, "*Vnfoulding more and more the Mystery, / And opening the Seales successively*" (ll. 18-19). But alongside her confidence is a deepening insinuation of uneasiness. The quick acknowledgment in "To the Reader" that "the helps I had

therein were small" in retrospect seems particularly worrisome, and her comment near the opening of "The Preface" that "*Though no work can bee so from error kept / But some against it boldly will except*" (ll. 6-7) introduces a dramatic confrontation that quickly accelerates.

Her protestations of modesty are sincere, humble, and conventional (ll. 79-84), but she refuses to be intimidated or silent. Others may speak with more authority and "*right informacion*" (l. 90), "*Yet this cannot prevayl to hinder me / From publishing those Truths I do intend, / . . . Nor will I therfore only keep in thought, / But tell what God still for my Soule hath wrought*" (ll. 92-93, 97-98).

Here she overcomes her reticence to speak in and to a community of friends—no small victory—but soon acknowledges a far greater challenge. There is a dual audience for her poems, paralleling the dual communities of her life, the godly and the wicked, and it is the latter group, of course, who are the most dangerously intimidating, adversarial, and undermining.[3] Like Swift years later in *The Battle of the Books*, she uses the classical (and Baconian) figures of the spider and the bee to construct an allegory of reading that is also a vehicle of social analysis and critique. She is encouraged to send out her poetic flowers by knowing that faithful and generous readers will not only forgive but help compensate for any deficiencies, "*Wisely supplying every place that lackt, / By helping to discover what was meant / Where they perceive there is a good intent*" (ll. 124-26). But her flowers will also be susceptible to the actions of a much less sympathetic group,

> *a spider generacion,*
> *Whose natures are of vennom so compacted,*
> *As that their touch occasions depravacion*
> *Though lighting in the fragrantest plantacion*[.]
> (ll. 114-17)

While the specific focus here is on the reception of her modest poems, barely beneath the surface is an even more troubling sense of vulnerability and danger. She adopts the language of the psalmist (cf.,

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[3]For interesting comments on the "dialogics" of seventeenth-century women writers addressing two audiences, see Hilary Hinds, *God's Englishwomen: Seventeenth-Century Radical Sectarian Writing and Feminist Criticism* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 158-70.

for example, psalms 18, 28, 42, 62, and 71), allying herself with one of the most powerfully enabling models of devotional writing, and asserting a typological connection with a figure like herself whose life as well as lines were bolstered by God but continually threatened by a potentially all-enveloping and demoralizing "strife of tongues" (Psalms 31:20):

> *So trusting that the only Sov'rain Power*
> *Which in this work alwaies assisted mee,*
> *Will still remain its firme defensive Tower,*
> *From spite of enemies the same to free*
> *And make it useful in some sort to bee,*
> *That Rock I trust on whom I doe depend,*
> *Will his and all their works for him defend.*
> (ll. 127-33)

The comments on writing that immediately follow in the opening section of "The Discourse" continue her daunting task of humbly and almost apologetically explaining and justifying the volume to her godly audience and at the same time boldly and bravely resisting the malice of the generation of spiders that surrounds her. Perhaps part of the reason why this section of "The Discourse" seems wavering and emotionally taut is because Collins is both very sensitive to criticism and aware that a devotional poet's conventional protestations of modesty, worthlessness, unskillfulness, and personal and poetic defects can echo and all too easily slide into a capitulation to the never-ending criticisms of the ungodly. She does not capitulate, and bravely offers her works to their proper audience, "You that indeared are to pietie" (l. 1). She hesitates to claim too much for her poems, and is particularly wary of entering the world at large (ll. 15-17), but this does not stop her from envisioning some "pious friend" (l. 18) reading the volume "to the end" (l. 19) and appreciating her true intentions.

Collins acknowledges her "want of Art" (l. 21) and "want of skill" (l. 27), but these aesthetic limitations are inconsequential and do not detract from the main purposes of writing that she describes in a brief four-part manifesto. First, she writes "Vnto the praise of Gods most blessed name" (l. 30) to "Reveal his power, and immortall fame" (l. 32). Second, she notes that while her abilities might not be great, she

has been "bequeath'd" a "Tallent" (l. 38), which, according to the parable in Matthew 25, lays upon her a sacred obligation to write. Third, her poems may help establish and confirm a trans-temporal community of the faithful and spread holiness, even after her death, by drawing "some neare Kindred" (l. 44) to "read the Scriptures touched in this book" (l. 49). And finally, even to unknown readers the volume will usefully present "the image of her mind" (l. 53) and "how she was inclin'd" (l. 54), an exemplary and consoling fable of how affliction and "low" status (l. 56) do not preclude and in fact may likely signify God's grace.

Spiritual Self-Defense and a Poetics of Resistance

As much as "The Discourse" spells out Collins' thoughtful commitment to poetry, it also conveys the extent to which her attempts to praise God, serve the holy, and consolidate her self are defensive as well as affirmative, and always register her awareness of the dangerous consequences of "liveing where profanenesse did abound" (l. 106). Profaneness is no abstraction for Collins, but an existential fact that she feels as a devastating personal insult and attack. The most venomous form that "profanenesse" typically takes for Collins is the "spite of enemies," and in the opening of "The Discourse" she seems to be haunted by the "dis-esteem" (l. 7), "dis-regard" (l. 10), and "scornfull eye" (l. 13) of the ungodly. Much more than pride in her work or a sense of worthiness is at stake: Collins' entire self may be shattered or silenced. She conveys her sensitivity to contentious voices and the devastating consequences of verbal insults in her lyric expressions of complaint and in theological commentary. Later in "The Discourse," in a section glossing the Ten Commandments, she emphasizes that the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13), is "transgrest" not so much "by murther" as by

> vexing words, and scornfull mockeries,
> Which are occasions of extreamities,
> Distresse of mind, heart-griefe, perplexity,
> And life hath often prejudice thereby[.] (ll. 444-48)

Most of the poems in *Divine Songs and Meditacions* are set in this dangerous landscape of malice, typically figured as an assault on her emotional stability and attempts at devotional service and praise. For example, in "A Song declaring that a Christian may finde tru Love only where tru Grace is," Collins pictures the "Commocions" (l. 9) in a family and a society torn apart by "scoffing" (l. 33). Satan's agents, the "gracelesse crew" (l 65), "slander and calumniate" (l. 59) the holy, damaging any hopes one might have for relying on supports the world might offer but reinforcing a turn to true "internall ornaments" (l. 93) and communication among the community of the "godly wise" (l. 98). Collins rarely fails to link the aesthetic and the devotional: here, as elsewhere, the choice of an audience for her poems asserts what for her is an all-important social and spiritual affiliation. And in "A Song expressing their happinesse who have Communion with Christ," the "distracting care" that "scorches" her mind (ll. 1-2) and makes her "fruitlesse" (l. 3), is intensified by the slander of those around her. She constructs not a psychomachia, a projection of inner demons, but an allegorical "shade" where

> *Sorrow* there frequents,
> The Nurce of Discontents,
> And *Murmering* her Mayd
> Whose harsh unpleasant noise
> All mentall fruits destroyes
> Whereby delight's convayd. (ll. 11-16)

Murmuring, the demoralizing taunts of the wicked, echoes throughout the volume and, along with a sense of physical weakness, is the main form that affliction takes for Collins. Recurrent references to such things as the "blasts of cloudy care" that make her "unfit for action" ("A Song exciting to spirituall Alacrity," ll. 7-8) and the "Sad Discontents and Murmors" that threaten to ruin one's "Wits" ("Another Song exciting to spirituall Mirth," ll. 44, 42), describe a world that is routinely inhospitable to her poetry, her emotional and devotional well-being, and God and the godly in general.

The inhospitable and antagonistic murmurs of the world can never be completely banished and must be recorded, but they can be mobilizing as well as overwhelming, and Collins describes and practices a devotional poetics of resistance, reassurance, and

resourcefulness. She thematizes her boldness, and makes numerous direct comments in her poems stressing her resolution to speak out about a wide range of personal and public issues. From the beginning of the volume she humbly describes the compelling reasons for her to write and affirms that neither lack of confidence nor the demeaning criticism of an unsympathetic audience will "*prevayl to hinder me / From publishing those Truths I do intend*" ("The Preface," ll. 92-93). Silence on her part would be ungrateful and uncharitable: one should acknowledge the "*favours of a Friend*" (l. 95), especially of course if these favors are signs of the grace of God. And integral to Collins' poetics is the notion that the end of devotional meditation is public expression as well as mental exercise and knowledge; hence her determination that she will do more than "*only keep in thought, / But tell what God still for my Soule hath wrought*" (ll. 97-98).[4]

She is encouraged, supported, and obligated to write by the highest of all authorities. In "A Song expressing their happinesse who have Communion with Christ," Collins describes a reciprocal process. Christ, no mean artificer, shows his love and tells his friends, the holy, why they are afflicted, and in turn, leaves them with his charge: since "they are Christs indeed ... let such confesse / They are not comfortlesse" (ll. 129-44). Earlier in the poem, "Then chearfull may I sing" (l. 30) was her wish; at the end of the poem, it is her duty and, with God's help, her achievement. In "A Song shewing the Mercies of God to his people," as in Herbert's powerful lyric of emotional and poetic recovery, "The Flower," Collins links rebirth from the near-death of "the Winter / Of Sharp Afflictions" (ll. 11-12) with poetic inspiration and the rousing of "spirituall mocion / Whereby we make towards God with devocion" (ll. 37-38). Our responsibility is to ripen and quicken (l. 58) to a poetry of praise: once returned from the "Root" (l. 14)—temporary inactivity and wintry discontent—"Then must our flowers of piety savour, / And then the fruits of

[4]In the introduction to *Divine Songs and Meditacions*, p. xii, I comment briefly on the recurrent theme of knowledge in Collins and cite some key references that illustrate how she characteristically links knowledge with action (political and devotional) and expression. Collins is a deeply meditative poet (a topic well worth exploring further) but not often passive: she is more typically "unto mocion and action excited" ("A Song shewing the Mercies of God to his people," l. 28).

righteousnesse / We to the glory of God must expresse" (ll. 18-20). And she boldly affirms her resolution to live up to this responsibility of expression, despite her own moodiness and the pressures of the ungodly, in the opening lines of "A Song demonstrating The Vanities of Earthly things," as she vows to reclaim poetry for religious purposes: "Shall Sadness perswade me never to sing / But leave unto Syrens that excellent thing, / No that may not be" (ll. 1-3).

For Collins, silence is leaden: the holy and afflicted must speak out. But she does not subscribe to every kind of poetic expression or voice. She defines the kind of poetry that she feels is particularly useful, and a key part of this process is her specific refusal to write or endorse what I would call a poetry of mere complaint. In "The Discourse," she describes her early inability to master or make sense of her afflictions and notes that simply telling her grief afforded no relief: "'Twas to no end, but altogether vain, / My several crosses namely to express, / To rub the scar would but encrease the pain" (ll. 78-80). The real target here, though, is not the inefficacy of poetic expression but the dangers of the all-too-human predilection for giving in too easily to our pain or, in effect, coming to love it too much.

Collins differentiates between poetry that gives voice to one's suffering and discontent, and poetry that deeply acknowledges one's pain in the context of God's grace and divine plan that give meaning to and relief from that pain. In "Another Song exciting to Spirituall Mirth," for example, she reminds her reader that

> They that faint
> With complaint
> Therefore are too blame,
> They ad to their afflictions,
> And amplify the same. (ll. 22-26)

One should not deny one's afflictions, but her voice must be free of "grudging" (l. 64) and "murmoring" (l. 65).

Her warning against mere complaint as counterproductive is reinforced by an occasional identification of the voice of complaint with the ungodly. In "The second Meditacion," Collins points out that one's style of expression mirrors one's devotional state. The "Sanctifide" (l. 104) are characterized by "gracious speeches" (l. 103),

saying with the Psalmist that "Tis good for me that I have been afflicted" (l. 98), but "the wicked" voice their complaints differently:

> At every crosse they murmor, vex and fret,
> And in their passion often will they say,
> How am I with Calamities beset!
> I think they will mee utterly destray[.]
> (ll. 109-12)

This way of speaking shows a "carnall mind" (l. 121), and, when adopted by the holy, may aid the ungodly. In "The third Meditacion," Collins warns against a poetry of complaint on strategic grounds:

> Then let it not be told in *Ashkelon*,
> Neither in *Gath* let it be published,
> That those that seek the Lord and him alone
> In any case should be discouraged,
> Lest it rejoyce the wicked this to see,
> Who think the wayes of grace unpleasant be. (ll. 19-24)

The holy must express themselves, but their poetry of affliction must be a poetry of strength and confidence: to give comfort to themselves of course, but also to avoid giving comfort to the enemy. A major part of the drama visible throughout *Divine Songs and Meditacions* is Collins' constant effort to define and practice this positive poetics, and the drama culminates in the three linked poems—"Excessive worldly Greife," "A Song composed in time of the Civill Warr," and "Time past we understood by story"—that conclude the lyrical section of the volume (before the five meditations and the biblical paraphrase placed at the very end). As a sequence they contain Collins' most far-reaching claims for the assertive and combative power of her poetry: as a mode of self-support and divine praise, to be sure, but also as a mode of participating in the progressive revelation of the "Truth" and the ongoing and necessary reformation of the "Reformacion."

Allegories of Pain and Gain: "Excessive worldly Greife"

At first glance, "Another Song" ("Excessive worldly Greife") seems to be a rather simple poem of plain (though occasionally convoluted)

statement and plodding couplets about omnipresent physical and spiritual afflictions that are painful and demoralizing but must be bravely overcome, following the example of God himself, who was similarly "troubled" (l. 33) and "undervalued" (l. 34). But while it lacks the metrical variety and unified figurative structure of, say, "The Winter of my infancy," now Collins' most predictably anthologized and highly praised poem, "Excessive worldly Griefe" has a textual density and emotional power unmatched by any of the other poems in the volume, especially if it is read with those other poems in mind. The cumulative experience of reading all that has come before in the volume alerts us to the extent that this is a poem centrally about the drama of writing as it epitomizes Collins' tenuous devotional life and challenging devotional obligations. The previous poem notes that she must restrain "Discontent" (l. 1) in order to cultivate successfully "Health and Witt" (l. 2), but the presentation of "My greife for outward crosses" (l. 50) is vague and unspecified. Not so in "Excessive worldly Greife," Collins' most precisely focused analysis of the strain of "Health and Witt":

> Excessive worldly Greife the Soule devouers
> And spoyles the activnesse of all the Powers,
> Through indisposing them to exercise
> What should demonstrate their abilities,
> By practicall improvment of the same
> Unto the Glory of the givers name. (ll. 1-6)

We should recognize here a characteristic cluster of concerns from previous poems. The very first lines of the volume, in the prefatory address "To the Reader," point out that the "activity of spirit" Collins is most concerned about is her ability to praise God, associated with her poetry, identified in "The Discourse" as a "Tallent ... bequeath'd" to her (l. 38), to which she is "cald to strict account" (l. 39). In "The Preface," she notes that she was indisposed to exercise her "mentall powers" (l. 2) but overcame this confining "weakness" (l. 1) to escape the "waste" (l. 5) of her abilities and get them back on their "wonted course" (l. 4). And in "A Song exciting to spirituall Alacrity," she describes in somewhat jingling prosaic detail "The ill effects of fruitlesse greife" (l. 9), how "Discomforts will the heart contract" (l. 1) and can make one "unfit for action" (l. 8). All the

above is powerfully compressed in the opening lines of "Excessive worldly Greife."

The qualifying term "worldly" is critical and nicely underscores Collins' recurrent focus on grief that is existential, ontological, and also, as we will see even more clearly in the following two poems, social and political. Alongside her awareness of the personal responsibility for and consequences of sinfulness—evident in her assertions of weakness and explorations of her volatile moods and constant fluctuations in faith—is an insistent emphasis on external circumstances that afflict and test the godly, "Scourge[s]" like those detailed in "A Song exciting to spirituall Alacrity": "causelesse hate, or poverty, / Decay of parts, disease, or losse / Of Credit, Freinds, or Liberty" (ll. 45-48). "Excessive worldly Greife" pictures a trip through such a harrowing landscape, first briefly and allegorically in a consoling mini-Romance of "Vertu" triumphant:

> Though Envy wait to blast the Blossoms green
> Of any Vertu soon as they are seen,
> Yet none may therfore just occasion take
> To shun what Vertu manifest should make,
> For like the Sun shall Vertu be beheld
> When Clouds of Envy shall be quite dispeld. (ll. 7-12)

The threat here is to the speaker's worthy but vulnerable self in general, but specifically to her poetry, her prime testimony of God's goodness and power (the dual meaning of the repeated word "Vertu"). Poetry is both praise and assertion, a bold "manifesting" of one's self against all odds, in the face of the intimidating blasts of the ungodly that nip the blossoms and temporarily cloud the holy. As in "The Winter of my infancy," where the Sun nurtures spiritual recovery and an expressive "Art" (l. 9) celebrating that recovery with a "fruit most rare, / That is not common with every woman / That fruitfull are" (ll. 28-30), victory over "Excessive worldly Greife" similarly involves growing and showing one's flower.

Despite Collins' confidence that the "Clouds of Envy shall be quite dispeld," victory over worldly grief is never permanent. The first 12 lines of the poem present only a compressed version of a drama of threat and consolation that is immediately repeated in much greater detail in the remaining 24 lines, broken into two equal sections. The

first section presents a powerful description of a process of insult and disregard, the way of the world, that is liable to further damage an already fragile self:

> . . . there be some of no disart at all
> Who no degree in worth can lower fall,
> Prefer'd before the Verteous whom they taunt
> Onely because of some apparent want,
> Which is as if a Weed without defect
> Before the Damask Rose should have respect,
> Because the Rose a leafe or two hath lost,
> And this the Weed of all his parts can boast;
> Or elce as if a monstrous Clout should be
> Prefer'd before the purest Lawn to see,
> Because the Lawn hath spots and this the Clout
> Is equally polluted thoroughout[.] (ll. 13-24)

Here as elsewhere throughout the volume, Collins confronts a dual sense of disability: an awareness of her own bodily weaknesses and imperfections, painful enough, but intensified by her deep sensitivity to the humiliating taunts of the ungodly. It is this socially imputed sense of shame that is particularly disabling, skewing her sense of self and making the linked activities of self-assertion and holy praise extremely difficult. Part of what makes this section of "Excessive worldly Greife" especially poignant—besides the inescapable intimation that behind the figurative descriptions of damaged plants and spotted cloth lies some literal ailment—is Collins' repeated description of the "devouring" effects of slander. Though she knows that the ungodly are the custodians only of her reputation, not of her true self and self-respect, their taunts, which echo through these lines, not completely defused by her irony and rational critique, are relentless, painful, and intimidating.

The challenge, as in so much of Ben Jonson's poetry, is to construct and maintain an "integral self," one not vulnerable to the malicious slanders and demeaning judgments of those who have no true values, merits, or abilities; to surround oneself with a community of others capable of true faith and judgment, who will enhance one's reputation as well as self-respect; and to "manifest" one's self in a variety of ways. All this is spelled out in the last section of the poem, in lines that are

often clumsily inverted, strained, and convoluted, but which nevertheless trace a complex process of consolation and renovation:

> Therefore let such whose vertu favours merits,
> Shew their divinly magnanimious spirits
> By disregarding such their approbacion
> Who have the worthlesse most in estimacion,
> For who loves God above all things, not one
> Who understands not that in him alone
> All causes that may move affections are,
> Glimpses wherof his creatures doe declare,
> This being so, who can be troubled
> When as his gifts are undervalued,
> Seeing the giver of all things likewise
> For want of knowledg many underprise. (ll. 25-36)[5]

Collins is not, like George Herbert, tormented by the sly insinuations of self into devotional poems that presumably increase in humble holiness as they renounce and erase the inevitably prideful self.[6] She does not, like Marvell in "The Coronet," believe that bold self-assertion inevitably weaves a serpent into a poem intended to praise God. Nor does she, like Anna Trapnel, believe that to write holy verse she must cancel her voice and her self.[7] Quite the contrary: the

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[5]Since these lines, with the exception of the first two, are so hard to follow, it may be worth committing the heresy of paraphrase to avoid the even greater heresy of confusion, so I offer the following simplified summary: The virtuous should show their essential holiness by disregarding the criticisms of those who value what is worthless. Everyone who loves God above all things knows that God alone is the source and object of love, and signs of God and his love are visible in and expressed by his creations. If this is so, no one should be troubled when his abilities are undervalued, since many people, not knowing any better, undervalue God, the giver of all things.

[6]Stanley Fish in particular focuses on "letting go" as the prerequisite for Herbert's devotional poetry—and a virtually impossible one at that; see "Letting Go: The Dialectic of the Self in Herbert's Poetry," in *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 156-223.

[7]"The voice it doth come down and cast / All that is of self away; / But what's of Christ it doth show forth; / For it is that must bear sway. / That voice which is mine, pass sentence on; / But what is of the Lord, / Do thou

last thing Collins needs to do is to "let go" of or conceal her self. That would be to give in to the demands of the ungodly. Instead, devotion—and survival while "liveing where profanenesse did abound" ("The Discourse," l. 106)—requires self-affirmation and a certain amount of combativeness. The godly must stand up and speak out freely, actively negating the voices of the ungodly, "disregarding . . . their approbacion."

Collins' advice here, to herself and to other like-minded souls, echoes other bold statements throughout the volume of her resolution not to be silent or invisible: those "whose vertu favours merits"—that is, those who appreciate, aspire to achieve, deserve, and in short "prefer" true merit—should "Shew their divinly magnanimious spirits." "Vertu" is both moral and muscular, an inner strength and an outward expression. The "terror" of nothingness (see "The Winter of my infancy," l. 39, and "Having restrained Discontent," l. 24), the fear of being not merely taunted and insulted but defined in terms of "some apparent want" (l. 16), can be overcome by knowing and testifying that God is, inside and outside, the ground of one's being. This ability to "declare" her "Glimpses" of God makes "Excessive worldly Greife" a particularly powerful testimony of faith and narrative of recovery.

From Personal to Political Incivility: "A Song composed in time of the Civill Warr"

The following poem is even more focused on associating Collins with God and establishing a "union" (l. 101) with the community of Saints in the here and now as well as the future. The full title situates this poem (and, I believe, the other poems in the volume as well) very precisely: "A Song composed in time of the Civill Warr, when the wicked did much insult over the godly." It immediately announces a key expansion of Collins' lyric attention, and offers further evidence

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most sweetly utter forth / And O spread it abroad." Anna Trapnel, from a manuscript in a section headed "From the 29th day of the 10th month, 1657," quoted in Kate Chedgzoy, "Introduction: 'Voice that is mine,'" in *Voicing Women: Gender and Sexuality in Early Modern Writing*, ed. Kate Chedgzoy, Melanie Hansen, and Suzanne Trill (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1997), p. 4.

that she consciously resists a poetry of mere complaint, especially mere personal complaint. In the previous, deeply autobiographical poem she sets "Greife" generally in the context of the world at large, not just her own individual experiences, and allies herself with and charts a path for other like-minded and similarly troubled godly people. But in "A Song composed in time of the Civill Warr," the landscape of shared and purposeful affliction becomes even more broad, specific, and concrete—various events of the Civil War period appear as quintessential embodiments of "Excessive worldly Greife"—and writing from, about, and against this context, her poetry becomes a matter of public service as well as self-expression.

The opening question in this poem is not whether but how she will speak. She surveys several of the key models available to her as a woman devotional poet and, without denigrating any, finds that none suits her. First, she is not one of the "*Sibells*" (l. 1), who deal in "future things" (l. 2). It is unclear whether this is meant as a simple admission that she is incapable of foretelling the future or a more subtle announcement that she wants to differentiate herself from the many vocal and often, according to some, disorderly women prophets of the time. Nor is she inspired by "*Parnassus* Virgins Nine" to "Compose in Poëms neat" (ll. 3-4), a kind of mind-forged and conventionally endorsed aesthetic manacle. She acknowledges that her "mental mocions" (l. 5) must not be "To thoughts alone confind" (l. 8; a direct echo of "The Preface," l. 97): they must take expressive form to be communicated. But poetic form must not restrict her "free / Concepcions of the mind" (ll. 5-6). And finally, while Deborah, the poet, prophet, warrior, and ruler of Judges 4:5 is altogether admirable, she is a model for poetry of a "Land at Rest" (l. 10), certainly not the land Collins lives in. She needs to sing now and refuses to wait in silent "expectacion" (l. 14) ending in discouragement and "Lifes expiracion" (l. 16).

Collins' response is refreshing: she simply begins (actually, continues) to speak, even without the guidance of an "empowering" personal model or artistic mediator. Her ultimate model and motivation—envisioned as a woman—is Truth herself, with whom Collins identifies, allies, and suffers. At the core of this poem is a detailed description of how Truth and "Her followers" (l. 26) are endangered. Collins chastises those "who can, and will not speak /

Betimes in Truths defence" (ll. 17-18), perhaps a warning to those "with smooth pretence" (l. 20) whose metaphorical shining colors belie a more basic hypocrisy, dishonesty, and cowardice, and also a reminder to herself that even those unfairly wracked by the "malice" (l. 19) of others, as she is, may, if unable to stand up and speak out against it, "their luster lose / As cloth most foully stained" (ll. 23-24).

While the image of the stained cloth and the ensuing brief description of a follower of Truth plagued by slander (ll. 25-28) return us for a moment to the personal lament of the previous poem, Collins quickly turns to the specific topical allusions that are the broad reference points for her allegorical tale of the wicked insulting over the godly. In a previous essay I have attempted to identify as many of these topical allusions as possible, including key references to a proliferation of "false Worships" (l. 36), misapplied biblical study, restrictive oaths, imprisonment, confiscation of property, violence, libertinism, and the abuse of governmental power that, for Collins, characterize "Sathans course" (l. 30) in mid-seventeenth-century England.[8] Rather than pursuing these in further detail in the present essay, it is perhaps more important to note how topical allusions function in this poem and fit into her concept of her self as a writer. First, such allusions should reinforce our sense of her boldness: she not only writes, but writes publicly about matters from which women at this time were typically excluded, matters of ultimate concern to the godly. Second, topical allusions illustrate that she envisions herself as a chronicler of social and historical as well as personal afflictions (and triumphs, as we shall see later), categories that are, in fact, intrinsically interrelated for someone as typologically minded as Collins, convinced that the small, the large, the biblical, and the historical are all inevitably written into one another. Third, topical allusions alert us to her conception of writing as, to use the modern term, an intervention, a public act intended to have real consequences.

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[8]Sidney Gottlieb, "An Collins and the Experience of Defeat," in *Representing Women in Renaissance England*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), esp. pp. 222-26.

For the first two-thirds of the poem, the topical allusions describe a world in which Truth is perpetually assaulted and apparently ready to "fade" (l. 65), and in which Truth's "Friends" (l. 67) seem "wasted all" (l. 68). But this suddenly gives way to an affirmation of the durability of Truth—"Yet can she never fall" (l. 66)—and the survival of at least some of the faithful:

> Yet shall a holy Seed remain
> The Truth to vindicate,
> Who will the wrongeds Right regain
> And Order elevate. (ll. 69-72)

Implicitly, she is one of this remnant and her writing helps in tangible ways to vindicate the Truth and restore "The *Cause* that's now derided so" (l. 79): in the very least the cause of righteousness, if not the fabled "Good Old Cause" of a fully achieved spiritual and social reformation. She does so by envisioning the imminent triumph of the godly, and her imaginative evocation of the "auspicious dayes / To come" (ll. 89-90) fills the last four stanzas of the poem. The signs of the apocalypse are visible in the world, on high, and in her poem, all important components of the "spreading" (l. 97) of the Truth, "Which may the Saints afflicted cheare / Oft thinking hereupon" (ll. 99-100).

Collins' visionary poetry is consoling because it offers an interpretation of history that acknowledges the temporary success but imminent ruin of "Prophanesse" (l. 81), a vivid picture of what portends that ruin and what the ensuing triumph of the godly will involve, and a reminder of the mutual support provided by the community of saints—a community which, "Though most severely try'd" (l. 104), is in no small way brought and kept together by many such reminders throughout Collins' poems. In his facsimile reprint of selections from *Divine Songs and Meditacions*, Stanley Stewart left out "A Song composed in time of the Civill Warr" "because its subject matter was not thought representative of the work as a whole."[9] But while the

[9]Stanley N. Stewart, ed., An Collins, *Divine Songs and Meditacions* (1653), Augustan Reprint Society, number 94 (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1961), p. iii. I do not want to cite Stewart's invaluable edition only in the context of noting what he left out. I am deeply indebted

title is undoubtedly unusual for Collins, the subject is not: the poem embodies images, themes, and perspectives on personal, social, and religious issues that have run through the entire volume, and its emphasis on sacred poetry as not self-enclosed meditation but outer-directed, necessary, and effectual public action is the culmination, not the contradiction, of the previous lyrics.

The Poet Militant: "Time past we understood by story"

It is curious that while Stewart excluded "A Song composed in time of the Civill Warr" from his selection, he included the following poem, "Time past we understood by story," which is equally and explicitly topical, and confirms that for Collins a religious poet of affliction must be a poet militant. Positioned at a critical point in the sequence—as the concluding poem in the section of divine songs—"Time past we understood by story" focuses largely on her remarkable confidence in the potential impact of her writing, based on her awareness of the prominent role of narrative and interpretive shaping in history, her understanding of the ways that power flows through verbal representations and communication acts, and her faith, born of experience, study, and inspiration, that God works not only directly but through various mediations, various media.

The poem begins by contrasting two markedly different eras, each with its own historical lesson and mode of expression and knowledge:

> Time past we understood by story
> The strength of Sin a Land to waste,
> Now God to manifest his Glory
> The truth hereof did let us taste,
> For many years, this Land appears
> Of usefull things the Nursery,
> Refresht and fenc'd with unity. (ll. 1-7)

The choice of one kind of narrative rather than another is far more than a matter of style. The specific referent for "story" in the first line is unclear, but whether it calls to mind cautionary typology, parables,

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to his pioneering work, which for many years provided the only easy access to the bulk of Collins' poems.

legends, "prophane Histories" (as mentioned in "To the Reader"), fables, or moral tales, the kind of story that characterizes the past is primarily associated with a warning that reinforces our vulnerability. The current age, though, is one of "truth," which unlike "story" is a direct manifestation of God, linked, not surprisingly, with years of creativity, happiness, and peace.

In the next stanza she gives each of these eras a name, and the poem begins its move from broad moral and spiritual to specific contemporary political history:

> But that which crown'd each other Blessing
> Was evidence of Truth Divine,
> The Word of Grace such Light expressing,
> Which in some prudent Hearts did shine,
> Whose Flame inclines those noble minds
> To stop the Course of Prophanacion
> And so make way for Reformacion. (ll. 8-14)

To a great extent the fate of the current "Reformacion" in its battle against "Prophanacion" depends upon how completely the "Word of Grace" is written into the world, a process initiated by God but one that must be taken up by "prudent Hearts" and "noble minds." It may take more than versifying to make a Reformation, but throughout the poem Collins repeatedly identifies writing as the most effective vehicle of giving "evidence of Truth Divine" and the most powerful weapon against the ungodly.

This weapon is particularly well-chosen to combat an antagonist, the "course of Prophanacion," that Collins typically envisions not so much as a physical threat but rather as falsehood, misapplied intelligence, lack of knowledge, and verbal assault. She is well aware that the causes and ravages of the Civil War period do not reduce simply to stupidity and incivility, and she comments throughout the poem on political oppression, the destruction of the countryside, unjust confiscation of property, disorder, dislocation, and untimely death. But she returns again and again to a landscape of mental, epistemological, and ultimately verbal abuses, misprision in the highest degree that becomes the focus of her analysis and counter-attack.

All the great disturbances she pictures are traceable to or otherwise associated with such abuses. "Tiranny" is intimately and inextricably linked with "Sophistry" (l. 19). In their efforts to "'sturb the State" and overthrow all order (ll. 26-27), the devil and his agents work with "Elocution / And Hellish Logick to traduce" (ll. 22-23) the "better sort" (l. 28), opposing, insulting, and undermining their authority. Everyone is vulnerable, and the consequences of miscommunications and misrepresentations are devastating even to the privileged:

> Such false Reports did fill all places,
> Corrupting some of each degree,
> He whom the highest Title graces
> From hearing slanders was not free,
> Which Scruple bred, and put the Head
> With primest members so at bate
> Which did the Body dislocate. (ll. 29-35)

The specific references in this allegory of state are difficult to pin down: is she commenting on a division between the ruler (presumably Cromwell) and Parliament (the "primest members"), or alluding to the earlier division between the King and Parliament, which resulted in a somewhat more literal dislocation of the head from the body? Even if we cannot precisely identify the references, though, the basic picture is clear. The dangers to her own self and body analyzed so powerfully in "Excessive worldly Greife" are now writ large into the entire public body, and Collins demonstrates that not only individual consciousness but the structure of government and society are shaped by language and the modes of information transmission, and threatened by their perversion.

What we have here, in these hard times, is a failure to communicate and a crisis in representation:

> A Lying Spirit mis-informed
> The common-peeple, who suppose
> If things went on to be reformed
> They should their ancient Customs lose,
> And be beside to courses ty'd
> Which they nor yet their Fathers knew,
> And so be wrapt in fangles new. (ll. 36-42)

The devil is first and foremost a liar, capable of convincing the people that the Reformation is a threat to revered "ancient Customs" (perhaps of property and governance as well as worship) and an imposition of bondage to unwanted and unfamiliar innovations. Apparently unopposed, this false information led "Great multitudes" (l. 43) to join the fight against the Truth, with grim consequences. "Ignorance" produces and then intensifies "malice" (l. 45), and the resulting assault directed at the godly takes, as we have come to expect in Collins' poems, verbal form: a furious venting and reviling (ll. 46, 48), and a more sedate but equally insidious naming of "Piety as Enimy" (l. 47). Profaneness wields its power in part by control over language and communication, creating a culture of both ignorance and misapplied intelligence, the latter of which is responsible for the production of the mechanisms of physical destruction, the "Fabericks by Art contriv'd" that abolish "The beauty of the Land" (ll. 51-52).

Collins shrewdly understands that the weapons of the Civil War are words and swords, the first every bit as powerful as the second. In the last section of the poem, she seizes the word, and the concluding stanzas are a call to arms via a call to poetry. As in "A Song composed in time of the Civill Warr," she pins her hopes on an expressively militant "holy Seed" that will emerge and endure, even in the midst of all the destruction, to "vindicate" the Truth, "wronged Rights regain / And Order elevate" (ll. 69-72):

> But from those storms hath God preserved
> A people to record his praise,
> Who sith they were therefore reserved
> Must to the heigth their Spirits raise
> To magnify his lenity,
> Who safely brought them through the fire
> To let them see their hearts desire[.] (ll. 57-63)

Those who survive contemporary storms and trial by fire, like the blessed children in Daniel 3, have a responsibility to become secretaries of God's praise. Unlike the previous poem, though, which concludes with detailed descriptions of the "auspicious dayes / To come" (ll. 89-90), "Time past we understood by story" is not so much a visionary poem as a description of a visionary poetics, a poetics that is continually powerful but also continually necessary, never

accomplished once and for all. Collins alludes to the triumphant, apocalyptic future, but in a muted way, and she even acknowledges that "many faithfull ones" never achieve this vision. This adds a plaintive note to the poem, but does not undermine her confidence in poetic testimony as a vehicle for and an embodiment of "their hearts desire":

> Which is the Light of Truth professed
> Without obscuring shaddowes old,
> When spirits free, not tyed shall be
> To frozen Forms long since compos'd,
> When lesser knowledg was disclos'd. (ll. 66-70)

Using terms that echo the openings stanza's distinction between grim stories and story-telling modes of time past and newer, more bold and faithful manifestations of God's glory, Collins allies herself with a kind of poetry that as both medium and message spurns the bondage of set forms, old shadows, and "lesser knowledge" and instead professes the "Light of Truth" and "spirits free." True devotional poetry is not just a container for higher knowledge but an expressive form and brave, exemplary action signifying and spreading Truth and liberty.

The final component of Collins' visionary poetics described in this poem is that it is communal. For all that she may brood, here and elsewhere, over her individual difficulties and responsibilities as a writer, she usually does so in a group context, identifying herself not as a solitary singer but as part of "A people to record his praise," and insisting that the benefits of such poetic testimony are always both personal and collective. "Time past we understood by story" never loses sight of the "we," and concludes with a powerful assertion of how the present community of the godly connects to one that comes after. Like the speaker at the end of Donne's "The Canonization," Collins offers a text, a description of an exemplary action, a consoling and redeeming pattern from above to future generations. But she invokes not retreats and hermitages, mysteries of self-enclosed love, and lyrics of privacy, but active engagement, love that sustains, not arouses, and outward-directed lyrics of praise that acknowledge and communicate God's grace:

Who are preserv'd from foes outragious,
Noteing the Lords unfound-out wayes,
Should strive to leave to after-ages
Some memorandums of his praise,
That others may admiring say
Unsearchable his judgments are,
As do his works alwayes declare. (ll. 71-77)

"A Song composed in time of the Civill Warr," with its apocalyptic images of Truth on high and triumphant declaration of the godly finally attaining their well-deserved recognition, respect, and happiness, might have provided a particularly bold and uplifting conclusion for Collins' collection of divine songs. But "Time past we understood by story" ends—and ends the sequence—with an equally powerful and more subtle, complex, and understated visionary moment that shows the path as well as the destination, nicely summing up one of the key themes of the entire volume. Throughout *Divine Songs and Meditacions* Collins expresses, analyzes, and continually strengthens her sense of her poetic calling, especially by defining it as effectual public action, required of the godly. It is fitting, then, that she should conclude her lyrics by recording one last time the responsibilities and obligations but also the far-reaching rewards of the "activity of spirit" she announces from the very beginning as her primary "Theologicall employment" ("To the Reader"): writing sacred poetry.[10]

Sacred Heart University

[10]I am grateful beyond words to Achsah Guibbory for much support and advice on this essay, and to Jonathan Post for his encouragement, patience, and desperately needed editorial suggestions. I talked on many occasions with Louis Martz of my enthusiasm for An Collins, and wish that I could once more tell him how much of that was stimulated by his enthusiasm for and wise commentaries on the varied meditative styles of seventeenth-century devotional poets and the seriousness with which they described (and lived) a life of writing.