



Precious Bane: Collins and the Miltonic Legacy

Paul S. Sherwin

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During his brief and sorrowful career William Collins wrote a handful of enduring poems, the most powerful and innovative verse of the Age of Sensibility. This study traces Collins' struggle to assimilate or transcend rather than to be overwhelmed by the influence of his Sublime precursor Milton. Collins' achievement is remarkably diverse, his restless experimentation a manifestation of the quest for imaginative autonomy which is the dominant impulse of all his writing. Authoritatively and eloquently, Sherwin interprets Collins' major works including the "Ode to Evening," the poem in which Milton's presence is most enriching, the "Ode on the Poetical Character," "The Passions," "Popular Superstitions Ode," and the "Ode to Fear," Collins' most haunting and painfully burdened poem.

Although Harold Bloom and other prominent theorists of literary influence have recognized that Milton is the chief "daemonic" precursor of the Sensibility poets and the Romantics, *Precious Bane* represents the first extensive analysis of Milton's power both to daunt and emancipate an aspirant to the Sublime tradition. Bloom writes:

"Paul Sherwin's *Precious Bane* is at once the definitive study of the poetry of William Collins and also the best informed, most critically acute book yet written upon the Miltonic influence on subsequent poetry. Sherwin's deep learning and original insights illuminate Milton and Keats quite as much as they do Collins and the other tragic poets of Sensibility.

"Readers who seek rich speculation and advanced knowledge on such associated critical and historical problems as Romanticism, the Sublime mode, the agonies of poetic incarnation, and the relation of psychoanalysis to literature, will find abundant recompense in Sherwin's pages. No one in the future will teach, read or write about Collins, or the burdens of Miltonic influence, without starting from Sherwin's achievement."

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