

“Spasm” and Class: W. E. Aytoun, George Gilfillan, Sydney Dobell, and Alexander Smith

FLORENCE S. BOOS

THE BRIEF *FLORUIT* OF THE “SPASMODIC” POETS FOLLOWED CLOSELY ONE OF nineteenth-century British radicalism’s most signal defeats—the rejection of the 1848 People’s Charter. Spasmodic poems also “consistently [took] as their subject a young poet’s struggle to write the poem that would make him famous”¹—a conspicuous underlying theme of Wordsworth’s *Prelude* (1850), as well as the first edition of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Such personal and collective struggles in fact provided signature-themes for hundreds of English and Scottish working-class and humble life poets of the era, who penned Shelleyan “dream visions,” declaimed in the voice of rustic prophets, and focused their aspirations on the tenuous outlines of a more democratic culture to come. Melodrama and popular stage productions were also quintessential mid-Victorian working-class genres,² and political relevance may be found in contemporary critical tendencies to attack the Spasmodic poets for their melodramatic and declamatory extravagance.

Sydney Dobell, Alexander Smith, Gerald Massey, and Ebenezer Jones, in particular, were working- or lower-middle class in their origins and education, and several of these poets had contributed to the democratic fervor which culminated in the People’s Charter of 1848. Under the penname “Bandiera,” for example, Massey had written revolutionary verses, and Jones’s pamphlet on *Land Monopoly* (1849) anticipated arguments made famous by Henry George in *Progress and Poverty* two decades later.³ Smith followed with interest the actions of Chartism’s Scottish wing, and Dobell’s first poem, *The Roman* (1850), celebrated an imaginary hero of Italian independence after the manner of Browning’s *Sordello* and Bulwer-Lytton’s *Rienzi*.

Confronted with critical disregard of their work by social/literary “superiors,” working- and lower-middle-class poets faced certain recurrent dilemmas in their attempts to frame individual and collective identities. If they retreated into “proper” sentiments which “befitted” their station, who

would notice them? But if they seemed more assertive, topical, or sensuous, they inevitably affronted the sensibilities of influential middle- and upper-class critics. And if they dared to appropriate dramatic or sensational modes accepted in works of more respectable writers (such as Joanna Baillie in *Plays of the Passions*, Robert Browning in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*, or Matthew Arnold in *Empedocles on Etna*) they could expect damning autobiographical readings and *ad hominem* scorn from critics who condemned their authorial projections as well as their obstinate resistance to the critical instruction of their betters.

In this essay I will consider such nuances of social class in the “Spasmodic” controversy,⁴ and focus primarily on opposing critics W. E. Aytoun and George Gilfillan, and the effects of the controversy on Sydney Dobell, “home-schooled” author of *The Roman* (1850) and *Balder* (1854); and Alexander Smith, a modestly educated pattern designer who published *A Life-Drama* (1853), *City Poems* (1857), and *Edwin of Deira* (1861).⁵ I will also review briefly some of the ways in which critical savaging of the “Spasmodics” influenced canonical and semi-canonical poets such as Tennyson, the Brownings, and William Morris, and constrained the reception of other attempts at generic and stylistic innovation in the third quarter of the century.

Aytoun

William Edmondstoune Aytoun (1813-1865) was the only son of a wealthy Edinburgh family. His mother, a distant relative of Walter Scott, was a fierce Jacobite and lover of old Scottish lore, and his father was a successful lawyer of intellectual tastes and Whig political sympathies.⁶ Private tutors prepared the bookish and intelligent boy for the newly established Edinburgh Academy, after which he attended Edinburgh University. A staunch Anglican, he eventually abandoned his parents’ apparent politics to become a lifelong Tory. In view of his later role, it is interesting that Aytoun’s first published work was a collection of utopian romantic poetry. He dedicated *Poland, Homer, and Other Poems* (1832), published by his family when he was nineteen, to the local exile Prince Czartorysk, and included in it expressions of support for Polish independence, as well as appeals for a utopian future and an elegy for Shelley.⁷

After graduation Aytoun briefly practiced law in his father’s firm, and began a dual career as a successful criminal lawyer and part-time author. He wrote verses and reviews for *Blackwood’s* and polemical prose works such as *The Drummond Schism Examined and Exposed* (1842), in which he asserted that “if every one is to be allowed to follow out his own whims and crotchets in defiance of constituted authority and written law there is an end of the Church. . . . [T]he proposition is so self-evident, that I cannot

conceive how any person endowed with the ordinary faculty of reasoning can question it, or evade it, except by side winds and high-flown phrases, which sound well but signify nothing.”⁸

By the time he became professor of rhetoric and belles lettres at Edinburgh University in 1845, Aytoun’s colleague James Lorimer characterized his social views as follows:

If any man forgot his position, whether that position was acquired or inherited . . . his endurance was at an end. Other . . . faults of this class . . . seemed to offend his very bodily organs, and . . . he fled from [them] or thrust [them] from him as if [they] had been an outrage on his person. . . . [I]t naturally followed that he attached a very high value to social organization, to the existence . . . of the various classes into which society is arranged, . . . and . . . the traditional rules by which these distinctions are maintained.⁹

In his reviews for *Blackwood’s*,¹⁰ Aytoun reprehended much of the literature of his age for its “far-fetched metaphors and comparisons,” “mystical forms of speech,” unfortunate penchant for contemporary subjects and regrettable departures from the “safe, familiar, and yet ample range of recognized Saxon metres.” Indeed,

we may consider it almost as a certainty that every leading principle of art has been weighed and sifted by our predecessors; and that most of the theories, which are paraded as discoveries, were deliberately examined by them, and were rejected because they were false or impracticable.¹¹

Aytoun also found a friendly environment at *Blackwood’s* for his growing interest in the parodic genre of mock-review, of which the journal had published several prior examples. He prepared the ground for his most famous essay in the genre with an attack on the “Spasmodic School”’s alleged laxity of morals in a *Blackwood’s* article in May 1854,¹² in which he asserted that “it is full time that the prurient and indecent tone which has liberally manifested itself in the writings of the young spasmodic poets should be checked.”¹³

Indirectly here, and more directly in *Firmilian*, Aytoun had also begun to focus much of his indignation on his critical antagonist George Gilfillan’s advocacy of such “prurience.” Gilfillan was a prominent reviewer by this point for *Blackwood’s* more liberal and less prestigious rival the *Eclectic Review*, which challenged the traditional cultural hegemony of Edinburgh from its industrial competitor Glasgow.¹⁴ As Richard Cronin has observed,

Glasgow, where Smith lived and worked and Gilfillan and Bailey attended university, [was] the city with which Spasmodic poetry [was] most closely associated, and . . . defined . . . by its distance from Edinburgh, Scotland's cultural capital. . . . Aytoun's attack . . . was motivated by the belief that Gilfillan, Smith and Dobell were ill-educated and presumptuous interlopers into cultural precincts that ought to be reserved to their social superiors. (p. 295)

Confessional differences strengthened this animus, and such differences were closely correlated in Scotland with class. In his introduction to "The Execution of Montrose," the Anglican Aytoun had characterized the Scottish Covenanters—a group sacred to many for their deaths at the hand of government troops as they sought to worship in their fields and homes—as "a party venal in principle, pusillanimous in action, and more than dastardly in their revenge."¹⁵ In return, Gilfillan, a minister of the United Presbyterian Church, had characterized such attacks as the work of "a vulgar volunteer in a bad cause."¹⁶

Whatever the controversy's antecedents, Aytoun clearly aimed his remarks against Gilfillan in his alleged role as an abettor of Alexander Smith:

Alexander Smith possesses abilities which, if rightly directed, cannot fail to make him eminent as a poet. *The real danger to which he is exposed arises from the superlative commendation lavished upon him by men, who in the present deluge of cheap literature, have been let loose upon the public as critics.* . . . On the one hand, it is a pity . . . to allow a likely lad to be fly-blown and spoiled by the buzzing blue-bottles of literature; on the other, it is impossible to avoid seeing that the mischief has been so far done, that any remedy likely to be effectual must cause serious pain.¹⁷

Moreover, all of Aytoun's principal victims—Sydney Yendys (Dobell's pen name), Alexander Smith, J. Stanyan Bigg, and Gerald Massey—appeared in Gilfillan's "A Cluster of New Poets" in the *Third Gallery of Literary Portraits* (1854). Aytoun was particularly displeased by Gilfillan's favorable reception of Dobell's *The Roman*, as well as his praise of Smith's *Life-Drama* in "A New Poet in Glasgow," published in the *Critic* two years earlier.

In May 1854, Aytoun published his mock review of *Firmilian* by "T. Percy Jones," which derided the new poets' alleged Shelleyan extravagance ("Percy"), as well as their homely origins ("Jones"): "It is, of course, utterly extravagant; but so are the whole of the writings of the poets of the Spasmodic school; and, in the eyes of a considerable body of modern critics,

extravagance is regarded as a proof of extraordinary genius. . . . They are simply writing nonsense-verses."¹⁸

Firmilian's most effective stroke may have been its mock-preface, in which "T. Percy" postured in arrogant terms quite foreign to the tone of Dobell's prefatory remarks on his intentions, and *a fortiori* to the unassuming public persona of Smith, whose *Life-Drama* bore no preface whatsoever. Aytoun/"Jones"'s preface effectively created a kind of spasmody in drag,¹⁹ as "T. Percy"'s remarks argued the case for "negative capability":

I have been accused of extravagance, principally, I presume, on account of the moral obliquity of the character of Firmilian. To that I reply . . . that many of the characters drawn by the magic pencil of Shakespeare are shaded as deep, or even deeper, than Firmilian. Set my hero beside Iago, Richard III., or the two Macbeths, and I venture to say that he will not look dark in comparison. . . . If the extravagance is held to lie in the conceptions and handling of my subject, then I assert fearlessly that the same charge may be preferred with greater reason against Goethe's masterpiece, the Faust. . . . If I am told that the character of Firmilian is not only extravagant, but utterly without a parallel in nature, I shall request my critic to revise his opinion after he has perused the histories of Mesdames de Brinvilliers and Laffarge, and of the Borgias. (pp. viii-x)²⁰

Perhaps Aytoun's condemnation in working-class poets of the "extravagances" he apparently accepted in "great authors" was simply another in a long line of claims that *quod licet jovi non licet bovi*?

Be that as it may, the completed parody *Firmilian: or, The Student of Badajoz. A Spasmodic Tragedy* appeared in July 1854. Loosely based on the plots of *Faust* and of *Balder*, its mass-murderer protagonist struggles to emulate the hero of his own drama-in-progress, *Cain*, as he "blows up" cathedrals, temples, and mosques alike (salutary warnings of the dire consequences of doctrinal laxity). Aytoun's attack on Gilfillan appeared in his caricature of "Apollodorus" (a pen name assigned to Gilfillan by one of his editors, Thomas Aird), who is accompanied by a Smith-parody in the form of a costermonger named "Sancho." The former is a kind of literary-critical groupie in search of potential poetic "stars" (an allusion to Gilfillan's interest in astronomy):²¹

"I watch them, as the watcher on the brook
Sees the young salmon wrestling from its egg,
And revels in its future bright career." (p. 99)

"Sancho," the Smith-figure, sings of leeks and the barnyard, and examples of "Sancho"'s prosodic skills include the following:

“The old sow grunts as the acorns fall,
 The winds blow heavy, the little pigs squeak
 One for the litter, and three for the teat.”

When Gilfillan/Apollodorus hears Smith/Sancho’s refrain, and hails him as a poet of nature, the latter remembers his true (commercial) calling:

Here’s the primest cauliflower, though I say it, in all Badajoz. Set it up at a distance of some ten yards, and I’ll forfeit my ass if it does not look bigger than the Alcayde’s wig. Or would these radishes suit your turn? There’s nothing like your radish for cooling the blood and purging distempered humours. (p. 101)

When Apollodorus/Gilfillan then casts his eyes heavenward in search of more enduring inspiration, the falling body of another rhymers named Haverillo crushes him to death.

I find it hard to see much more than class-antagonism, jejune snobbery, and a sort of displaced self-loathing in this oddly grotesque cartoon. Correlatively, any characterization of it as the “critical parody of the century” would say more about “parody,” “criticism,” and “the century” than it would about the poetry of the period, or the variously gifted people who endeavored to write it.

Gilfillan

George Gilfillan (1813-1878), a minister of the United Presbyterian Church in Dundee, Scotland, struggled throughout his life against the constraints imposed on him by his role as a minister in one of Britain’s more hidebound denominations.²² Born the youngest of eleven children of Rachel and Samuel Gilfillan, the latter a dissenting “Secessionist” minister in a mixed Gaelic/English congregation in Comrie, Perthshire, on the edge of the Highlands,²³ he had little formal schooling, but read all the literature available to him, including the poetry of Wordsworth, Burns, and especially Byron.

By his own account, Gilfillan “lost in one day my father and my childhood” when he was thirteen (Watson and Watson, p. 18), but nonetheless set out on foot two weeks later for the University of Glasgow, too poor to afford any other conveyance. In his autobiographical *The History of a Man* (1856) he remembered Saturdays spent in bed reading Shakespeare, unable to buy fuel and huddling under covers to keep warm (p. 52). In his four years at the university he met the poet Thomas Campbell and discovered Thomas Chalmers’ *Astronomical Discourses*, which fostered a lifelong interest in astronomy. A fervent admirer of Shelley and Godwin, he also abandoned his belief in the Calvinist doctrines of his youth when

he realized “that I could not reconcile Christianity to nature, to man, to philosophy and science, to literature and poetry” (p. 288), and courageously sought to begin a literary career in Edinburgh after he had completed his M.A. at the age of seventeen.

In what to him was a strange and cold city, he began to attend “Christopher North”’s lectures, submitted compositions to publishers, and tried to support himself with part-time teaching. When he finally entered the divinity school of the United Secession Church, he was yielding to hunger and poverty so severe that he could not buy paper for his poems, and his principal motive (as he later recalled it) was despair:

If I had . . . had any smallest competence [bit of money]; or if I had had the slightest aptitude for business, I should have stopped short of a theological career. But I was miserably poor. I was, in all matters of business, a blind blunderer. . . . I had heard, too, a great deal of the precariousness of the literary man’s life; and I felt, therefore, that I must become either a wreck or a minister. (*The History of a Man*, pp. 289-290)

A lifelong opponent of the doctrine of eternal damnation, he also remembered “weeping like to break my heart, in the Meadows, one beautiful spring afternoon, as I thought of the doom awaiting the majority of the race. “‘Why,’ I asked, hast Thou made men in vain?” (Macrae, p. 106).

Gilfillan accepted the first job offered him after graduation from divinity school, in a working-class area of Dundee, and began his ministerial career at twenty-three. He took pastoral care seriously, but conflicts with his hierarchical superiors brought him more than once before a church tribunal, and the reformist cast of his temperament was clear in his voluminous religious writings, among them *Hades: or, The Unseen* (1842), *The Connection Between Science, Literature, and Religion* (1848), *The Grand Discovery; or, The Fatherhood of God* (1854), and *The Humanity of Christ* (1877), as well as his epic poem *Night* (1867).²⁴

In 1850, Sydney Dobell characterized Gilfillan as

an orthodox divine who proclaims that “a powerful cause of our recent refined scepticism may be found in the narrow, bigoted, and unworthy notions of Christianity which prevail, in the obstinacy with which they are retained, and in the contrast thus presented to the liberal and fluent motion of the general age. [He suggests,] let us inquire, if we have no difficulties, may it not be because we have never thought at all?”²⁶⁵

Throughout his career, Gilfillan leaned toward evolutionary or process-theological views of the sort later advocated by the twentieth-century

American theologian Charles Hartshorne.²⁶ He also recorded a conversation in July 1863 in which two fellow clergymen demanded “a new and sound theory of inspiration in the first place—construction to go before demolition. I want demolition before construction” (Watson and Watson, p. 299). A year after his death, his congregation voted in 1879 to secede from the Secession, and his successor David Macrae paid tribute to him as “the foremost pioneer of liberty and progress in the United Presbyterian Church . . . [who] in a marked degree . . . stimulated the reforming spirit in Scotland, clearing the path, and making it easier for those who followed” (Macrae, pp. 8, 9).

Among other things, Gilfillan was one of the first Scottish ministers to support Corn-Law-repeal and the People’s Charter (Fennell, p. 43), and he was well known in working-class Dundee for his opposition to capital punishment, his advocacy of public libraries, and his support for workers’ and women’s education. He welcomed North American abolitionists such as George Thompson, William Lloyd Garrison, and Harriet Beecher Stowe to Dundee, for example, and became known throughout Scotland for his personal invitation to Frederick Douglass to speak from his pulpit in 1846.²⁷ He also supported actively the causes of Italian, Polish, and Hungarian independence, met Mazzini in London in 1852, undertook a speaking tour of Scotland in 1851 to raise money for the liberation of Hungary, and condemned British imperialism in terms which extended to a rare sympathy for the Sepoy Rebellion.²⁸ His monthly winter talks about political questions drew hundreds of auditors (Fennell, p. 268), and his charities and visitations were locally well known, as was his condition for acceptance of a bursary of 1000 pounds from the citizens of Dundee that the sum be invested for the children of the poor.

Gilfillan’s literary tastes embraced the works of women, fellow Scots, and those of humble backgrounds, and when he managed to place his early literary articles in his friend Thomas Aird’s *Dumfriesshire and Galloway Herald* and *Hogg’s Instructor* in the 1840s, his espousal of the merits of Shelley and other Romantics’ work was sufficiently controversial that Aird felt obliged to publish them under the pseudonym “Apollodorus.” Gilfillan gathered these articles together in 1845 as *A Gallery of Literary Portraits*. This first set of twenty-five illustrated vignettes included Scots such as Chalmers, Wilson, and Thomas Campbell; Romantic figures such as Shelley, De Quincey, Coleridge, Landor, Wordsworth, and Southey; and an assortment of critics and theologians as well as the “Corn-Rhymer” Ebenezer Elliott. These overviews clearly embodied and mediated Gilfillan’s romantic, dissenting and radical sympathies, and he was among the first to praise Emerson, as well as to promote the merits of Shelley, Coleridge, Hazlitt, and Lamb.²⁹

Many years later, in 1906, W. Robertson Nicoll recalled Gilfillan's authority:

For about five years (1849-54) George Gilfillan's position as a critic was one of very great influence. It may be doubted whether even Carlyle had more power over young minds. These years were the period of a movement. There was a thrill in the air, a belief that the new world was at hand. This was felt beyond his immediate circle; it stirred in the books of the Brontës, the socialism of Kingsley, and the passionate preaching of Kossuth and Mazzini. . . . There was something, perhaps much of fever in it, but it helped Gilfillan to break into the depths of his genius.³⁰

The "genius" Gilfillan sought in his subjects was something akin to Hopkins' "inscape" or the Stoics' "character," and his introduction ("Advertisement") to the *Portraits* asserted in quasi-Carlyean fashion that people so marked were "the *decora et tutamina*—of their age; . . . some of them are less known and less appreciated than they deserve; [but the author] is not afraid . . . to avow himself, even in this late age, a 'Hero Worshipper,' and to avow his conviction that, even now, there are many heroes." Gilfillan's preface to the *Second Gallery*—which included several women—accurately remarked that he "confesse[d] to a much deeper satisfaction in the practice of praise than of blame."

A born teacher, Gilfillan also engaged his audience with a talent for personal asides, and his *Portraits*, editions of Burns and Scott, and three-volume *Specimens of Lesser-Known English Poets* were enormously popular in Scotland, America, and nonconformist circles (Fennell, p. 209). He was also a generous reader and commenter on others' works, a favor few had offered him in youth. It may not have been entirely accurate that "almost every literary aspirant in the country sent his manuscripts to the Dundee critic," as W. Robertson Nicholl remarked (p. vii), but Gilfillan wrote Dobell in 1854 that "my table is as usual loaded with [the poems] of others. I have returned within two months sixteen packets of poetry, some of them in folio, and others are pressing in" (Watson and Watson, p. 173). In his 1856 memoir, he noted that

I cannot enumerate the authors who have applied for advice in reference to their works or MSS., and in scarcely one case have I declined to give it. I lately packed up and returned sixteen MSS. in prose or verse, some of them as large as pulpit Bibles. . . . [T]he hundreds—I speak literally—of MSS. I have received within the last nine years have come from the most various quarters; from Wales,

and from John o' Groat's house; from Liverpool and the heart of the Highlands; from London, Bavaria, and the centre of Australia.³¹

He even published in *Hogg's Instructor* a wryly parodic petition of his own:

"Dear Sir,—As you have been so kind as to overlook, and so far to commend, the first two cantos of my epic, 'Ambrosio Lucento, or the Amiable Murderer,' I beg leave respectfully to request that you will take the trouble of overhauling, in the intervals of your invaluable time, the remaining cantos, which I am certain are not inferior to the others. . . . If you would also, in your great kindness, procure the publication of the poem, it would further oblige, your ardent admirer, O. T."³²

In *The History of A Man*, Gilfillan described "O. T."s real counterparts as shepherds, ploughmen, tailors, tinsmiths, . . . pattern-drawers, cattle-dealers. . . . I had no conception before that so many young men and maidens, too, were thinking and writing in a poetical way. The pleasure of aiding young aspirants is one of the purest and most exquisite in literary life." (pp. 253, 252-253)

Hall Caine, who had sent him a poem, remembered afterwards that

I was unknown to him, and he had no inducement to give me more attention than the man of letters usually pays to the hundred and one aspirants who seek his counsel. Gilfillan was a man of much mark at that time, writing frequently, lecturing constantly, traveling a good deal, and still preaching every week. Nevertheless he read my poem, and wrote me two letters about it of so much warmth of praise, yet so much candour of criticism, that my ambition, if it had ever smouldered, must have been fired afresh." (Watson and Watson, p. 460)

Given Aytoun's claims that "Apollodorus" was infatuated with "Spasmody," it is interesting to see what Gilfillan actually wrote about the subject in the subsection of his *Third Gallery of Literary Portraits* (Edinburgh, 1854) devoted to "A Cluster of New Poets." Dobell, Bigg, Smith, and Massey were indeed obscure when Gilfillan reviewed their work. None was socially well placed, and all had limited formal education and dissenting religious backgrounds as well as what would now be called "liberal" political views (Fennell, pp. 199-209). Raised in a tradition of self-examination, they were predisposed to write autobiographical poetry on metaphysical

subjects, and defend the kinds of reformist ideals expressed in Massey's early poems, Dobell's *The Roman*, and Smith's *Life-Drama*.

It is important to note that Gilfillan offered cautionary advice as well as help to Smith and Dobell. Like any good teacher, he mixed praise with careful admonition, and he later remarked that

my mode of dealing with [aspiring writers] . . . has been this:—I have sought to discover the particular talent that each of my correspondents possessed; if that was not decidedly poetical, I have discouraged them from verse, and pointed out some field more suited for their powers; if they seemed to me to possess any kind or degree of genius, I have said to each, "Perge, puer," but strongly enjoined on them . . . to cultivate [their gift] by stern study. (*The History of a Man*, p. 253)

Although he praised Smith in his essay for "the beauty and exquisite analogical perception displayed in his images from nature" and for their "variety of natural music" (Nicholl, pp. 66, 68), he also made many concrete suggestions. He advised him, for example, to supplement study of Tennyson and Keats with attention to broader models such as Homer, Dante, Shakespeare's tragedies, Goethe, and the Old Testament. He also suggested that the youthful Smith try to avoid affectation and "think and sing less about 'ringlets,' and 'waists,' and 'passion-panting breasts'" (p. 72). Finally, this abettor of "prurience" urged Smith to

fill up his own ideal, and accomplish his own prophecy. . . . [W]e do not want him to write religious poetry in the style of Watts or Montgomery, or any one else. . . . [W]e want him to devote his fine powers to . . . high spiritual truth. (p. 73)

Gilfillan also argued that Smith had the potential to become Glasgow's best poet since Thomas Campbell, high local praise, but not the ludicrous pantheonic hyperbole of Aytoun's lampoon.

Although Gilfillan befriended Sydney Dobell and took pleasure in the favorable reception accorded *The Roman*'s support of Italian independence, he also warned him that *Balder* was a compilation of fine passages which lacked form. In his published review, he found *Balder* superior to *The Roman* in its "wealth of thought and imagery" and "the music of the versification" (Nicholl, p. 5), but added that "[a]nother word, and all were gained . . . but the word comes not, or the wrong word comes instead" (pp. 47, 50).

His final reflections were even more telling:

The two main objections to *Balder* will be monotony and obscurity.

. . . [The hero] talks too much, and does too little. The poem is little else than one long soliloquy. . . . *Balder* is in *this* respect a poem of the Manfred and Cain school, but is far longer, and thus palls more on the attention than they. . . . The wailings of Balder toward the close become oppressive, inarticulate, and half-frenzied; and from the lack of interest connected with him as a person, seem unnatural, and produce pain rather than admiration. (p. 57)

Gilfillan also found Dobell's view of love almost obsessively "spiritual," and argued accurately that the poem's fragmentary portrait of Amy is flawed by its lack of immediate human emotion.

Gilfillan's praise of the third "new" poet J. Stanyan Bigg, author of *The Sea-King* (1848) and *Night and the Soul* (1854), for his "quick perception of those real, but mysterious analogies, which bind mind and nature together" (Nicholl, pp. 80, 89) was also tempered with the rather stringent observation that

Night and the Soul is just a heap of fine and beautiful things. The story has no hinge. The plot is nothing. . . . All the characters talk equally well, and all talk too long. . . . Hence inevitably arise considerable monotony and tedium. . . . Mr. Bigg appears to us to write too fast, and too diffusely. Many of his passages would be greatly improved by leaving out every third line. (pp. 93-94)

Gilfillan praised the fourth poet, Gerald Massey, as a "struggler— with poverty, . . . a narrow sphere, . . . doubts and darkness," who has set "Chartism to music" (pp. 96-97) and written good poems on domestic subjects (Massey's critiques of the marketplace of marriage were arguably proto-feminist). But since "sanguine hopes and notions of humanity [might] wither" (p. 104), he expressed hopes that Massey might seek deeper channels of poetic anger, for "since Burns, there has been no such instance of a strong untaught poet rising up from the ranks by a few strides" (p. 103).

Gilfillan, in short, thought the poets he praised had written work that might stand beside Browning's *Pauline* (1833), say, or Tennyson's 1830 *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*,³³ and offered advice of the sort any good creative-writing teacher or twenty-first-century dissertation adviser might offer a hopeful and promising student. He later reflected on his larger efforts in such capacities in *The History of a Man*:

Amidst all this mass of poetry [the hundreds of MSS sent him] there was, of course, much rubbish; but there was also much that was excellent, and full of promise. A considerable number, perhaps twenty, of those poems which I received in MS. have been printed;

and two or three of them, I am proud to say, have become [among the] most popular poems of the day.

Some of these the public, as well as myself, have probably over-rated a little. . . . I value these New Poets, however, not merely in themselves,—and I think them men of real genius,—but because they are the promise of better things. (p. 254)

Aytoun's exaggeration of all this suggests that the underlying aim of his hyperbolic parody was to reestablish religious and political as well as literary boundaries. The success of his reactionary assault, like that of its larger political counterparts a few years earlier, blunted Gilfillan's hope of "better things," and effectively denied his later *History of a Man and Night: A Poem* the critical attention their considerable merits deserved. D. G. Rossetti, who owned several of Gilfillan's editions and enjoyed reading them with his friends, later appraised the affair to his friend Hall Caine as follows: "Gilfillan was powerful, though sometimes rather 'tall' as a writer, generally most just as a critic, and lastly, a much better man, intellectually and morally, than Aytoun, who tried to 'do for' him."³⁵

Dobell

In *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold averred that

the great works by which, not only in literature, art, and science generally, but in religion itself, the human spirit has manifested its approaches to totality and to a full, harmonious perfection . . . come, not from Non-conformists, but from men who either belong to Establishments or have been trained in them.³⁵

One such Non-conformist was Sydney Dobell (1824-1874), the son of a wine-merchant, who was raised in accordance with the principles of the "Church of God." This was a small "rationalist" sect founded by his grandfather Samuel Thompson, which rejected baptism, communion, atonement, original sin, and the need for public worship, and abjured all connection with those "in the world" who failed to honor such commitments. Dobell's family had hoped to install Sydney, the eldest of ten children, as his grandfather's successor and future leader of the sect, but the precocious boy was drawn to literature more than to dogmatism. He wrote a drama on Napoleon when he was fourteen, and had memorized most of *Manfred* by the time he was sixteen.³⁶ Dobell's family remained hostile to his aspirations, however; years later, he wrote his sister that his mother's reaction to the news that he had read a lecture on poetry to the Edinburgh Philosophical Society was that she would have been "pleased if she heard I was preaching *Religion* anywhere, but . . . to lecture on the *Nature of*

The Critics



William Edmondstoune
Aytoun

George Gilfillan
in *Nineteenth-Century British Literary
Biographers* (Detroit: Gale, 1994), p.
144



The Poets



A. Smith

Alexander Smith, in *Victorian Poetry Before 1850* (Detroit: Gale, 1984)



Sydney Dobell.

Sydney Dobell
in *Life and Letters of Sydney
Dobell* (London, 1878)



Gerald Massey
frontispiece to *Poems* (Boston,
1860)

The Books



Aytoun, *Lays of the Scottish Cavaliers* (Edinburgh, 1863)



Aytoun, *Lays*



Dobell, *Balder* (London, 1854)

Poetry seem[ed] to her vanity, in which she c[ould] take no interest."³⁷

Dobell suffered from apparent epilepsy and attacks of rheumatic fever which began when he was in his early twenties. Marriage partially liberated him from his family's demands, but his wife fell ill during a four-month collapse of his own health in 1847,³⁸ and "the undercurrent of his life . . . [thereafter was] one of deep sorrow and anxiety, owing to the failure of any medical treatment to ward off [her] attacks" (Jolly, 1:97). Preoccupied throughout his life with the implicitly male role of the poet as commentator and social critic, he also maintained an undercurrent of sympathy for the demands such ambitions imposed on women. A "physical-force" Chartist in his youth, he also shared George Gilfillan's interest in European revolutionary movements,³⁹ and quickly became one of the latter's steady correspondents and lifelong friends. Both men were generous with help and advice to others, found solace in long walks in the countryside, experienced highly vivid and sometimes trance-like dreams, lived with sectarian bigotry on a day-to-day basis, and yearned for broader counterparts of the religious convictions in which they were raised.

Gilfillan helped his friend arrange for publication in 1850 of *The Roman*, in which a revolutionary monk is executed for his efforts to liberate "mother" Italy from Austrian tyranny. Mazzini was sufficiently impressed by Dobell's account of the singleminded monk's devotion to liberty to send him word that he had "written about Rome as I would, had I been born a poet" (Jolly, 1:200). *The Roman's* several song-interludes included a love poem from a husband to his wife, and it seems reasonable to interpret the "monk"'s resistance as a stylized amplification of Dobell's reaction to his claustrophobic religion and family (Thrale, pp. 94-97).

At last Dobell severed the remaining ties with his grandfather's sect⁴⁰ and began to write a verse-drama whose working title was *The Scoundrel*. He described its plot to Gilfillan (who advised him to scrap the title) as follows:

The hero of the drama is a student, the subject his inner life [,] . . . my student is *writing an epic*, . . . [whose] subject . . . [is] the last battle of Tyrants and Slaves. . . . You see, therefore, that without destroying the unity of my work, I have every outlet for every variety of thought and passion. (Jolly, 1:232-233)

As the projected title suggested, Dobell conceived his project as a post-romantic critique of its Faustian/Byronic protagonist which would point an implicit moral of the dangers of overweening self-regard, after the model of "Porphyria's Lover" or *Wuthering Heights* and other contemporary accounts of self-deluded neo-romantic protagonists. He later retitled the work *Balder*, and cast it as the first part of a Divine-Comedy-like trilogy whose

protagonist emerges from hell into the daylight of personal redemption.

Critical responses to the published poem were almost uniformly and virulently hostile. *Chambers' Journal* contented itself with the remark that "the tendency to the speculative and the metaphysical, which seems to be apparent in recent poetry, is not a healthy one."⁴¹ The *Athenaeum* reviewer considered "the poem, as a whole, . . . repugnant in story, ponderous in style, false in philosophy. . . . The grossness of the conception renders it absolutely unfitted for the purposes of poetic art."⁴² The *Westminster Review's* assessment closed with the following cadence: "After plodding our weary way to the last of nearly three hundred pages of the dreariest verse we have laboured through, we arrive at the final consummation of this revolting story."⁴⁴ Even Charlotte Brontë wrote the poet reproachfully that

I did not and could not think you meant to offer [Balder] as your cherished ideal of the true great poet. . . . Do we not all know that true greatness is simple, self-oblivious, prone to unambitious, unselfish attachments? I am certain you feel this truth in your heart of hearts. (Jolly, 1:329-330)

Gilfillan, for his part, regretted "that [Balder was] not a higher step towards the pedestal of popularity and power whence you meant to preach Christianity to the young age" (Watson and Watson, p. 170), and Dobell's friend Gerald Massey made a carefully nuanced effort to defend the work's moral intent in a more praiseful review for *The Eclectic*:

It is foolish to complain of want of action in a poem which does not admit of action. . . . It is a drama of internal experience and intellectual phase. . . . Balder is but the individualized idealization of the general spirit which pervades the whole mass of society—Genius without faith and reverence." (p. 170)

The poem's title invoked the Norse hero Balder's battle against blindness. One might read the poem as a metatheoretic account of an intellectual protagonist's mental decline, somewhat in the manner of Raskolnikov's derangement in *Crime and Punishment*, as Balder descants on a variety of topics as he ignores his invalided and chronically depressed wife. Dobell failed utterly, however, to anticipate that readers who bore with more conventional villainy in "Porphyria's Lover" or "My Last Duchess" might not be willing to listen to a potential mercy-killer/wife-murderer's philosophy lectures. The beginning of the poem's horrifically eroticized final scene, in which Balder prepares for the "mercy-killing" of his wife, is laden with overtones of *Othello*:

How oft have I undone thy weeds as now,

And very softly, very silently
 As now—and not more tenderly, no not
 More tenderly, no, on thy bridal night,
 No, not more tenderly. . . .
 Here, under her bosom,
 It cannot fail here. . . . Soft, soft;
 Thou hast so often struggled in mine arms
 Asleep, and I have wakened thee with kisses,
 I pray thee do not struggle now, my child,
 I cannot rouse thee from this dream.
 Oh God,
 If she should clasp her hands upon her breast
 And moan!¹⁴⁴

Dobell's notes indicated that Amy survived,⁴⁵ however, and that his closet-drama counterpart of Marlowe's Faustus would indeed find redemption in the work's final act.

Buried in the controversy are eighteen songs in which Amy undercuts Balder's self-pitying monologues, and effectively carries the moral weight of the poem. In the pages just prior to the self-absorbed monologue quoted above, for example, she cries out from the depths of her illness, rage, and despair:

Thou knowest not, husband, what it is to lie
 With all the sea between thee and the wind,
 And the sea-rock between thee and the sea.
 I say why should I lie here? . . . Man, what have I
 To do with thee? How long is't since we two
 Drew near? I am altered since we met,
 What then? Have we dwelt at the further poles
 For nought? Because my puppet warmed thy bed
 And filled thy chair have we been side by side?
 Hear! Thou shalt hear; my voice is coming up;
 Hark, hark, it comes; dyed with the dark, it comes!
 Now it comes into me, now I will cry;
 [*She shrieks*]
 I am his wife! This is my murderer! (*Balder*, pp. 279-280)

The poem's very notoriety ensured that a second edition of it would appear, and Dobell endeavored to respond to his critics in its preface:

[My critics have] taken for granted that I must personally admire the character I think fit to delineate, and that I present as a model what, in truth, I expose as a warning. . . . [T]hat I have no theoreti-

cal approbation of such errors, may, I think, be naturally inferred from the history of failure and sorrow which I have herein attached to them. (pp. iv-v)

All these arguments were correct enough, but a clearer design for his poem might have obviated the need to write them. Dobell's underlying thematic intentions had promise, but his basic talents were lyrical and declamatory. His decision to cast *Balder* as an epic created expectations its real but limited merits could not meet, and its airless "plot" overwhelmed the lyricism of its songs and the courage of its attempt to confront madness, egotism, repression, and domestic strife.

Balder is arguably proto-feminist in that (unlike Tennyson in *Maud*) Dobell gave a victimized wife the poem's strongest voice. The poem's pathology anticipated not only certain aspects of *Maud*, the work with which it is most often compared, but also psychologically probing prose works on the topic of marital conflict such as Meredith's *Modern Love* and Gissing's *The Odd Women*. But Dobell's poetic contemporaries took care to embed such predicaments in carefully relativized narrative frames (*Aurora Leigh*), or conceal them behind quasi-historical veils (Tennyson's *Idylls*, Morris' *Defence of Guenevere*, Robert Bulwer Lytton's *Clytemnestra*, and Browning's *The Ring and the Book*). Dobell's fate helped ensure that none of his immediate successors would attempt to address delusion and its consequences without such softening filters.

Smith

Alexander Smith (1829-1867) was born in "a humble thatched house"⁴⁶ in Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, Scotland, the son of Helen Murray, a resolute woman of Highland ancestry, and Peter Smith, a designer of patterns for shawls and calico prints. The great sadness of Smith's early life was the death of a beloved younger sister, a memory that may have lingered in "The Garden and the Child" section of *A Life-Drama*. Smith's marked precocity at school raised hopes of education for the ministry, but financial need forced his family to apprentice Alexander to a cloth-design warehouse when he was ten, and he worked at this trade ten hours a day, six days a week, with one week of annual holiday for the next eleven years. For at least part of this period, he was in fact his family's chief wage-earner (Jolly, 1:356-357). His only consolation as a boy was that the labor he engaged in—tracing designs on muslin fabric with lithographic ink—was often mechanical enough so that he could compose verses in his head as he worked. In the words of his biographer:

The piece of paper used under the hand of the penner, to prevent

contact with the prepared surface of the design, was often by night filled with hasty scribblings, and was then rolled up and deposited in his vest pocket. These scribblings were polished and expanded at home before . . . [he went] to bed, or in the still hours of the early morning. (Brisbane, pp. 18-19)

Incredibly, Smith managed to read widely and systematically despite his grueling work-week, and for seven years attended meetings of a Glasgow “literary society for essay-writing and debate,” a group of earnest students which functioned as a kind of self-taught school (pp. 38-39).

When he reached twenty-one, he also began to seek an audience for his poems. The poetry editor of the *Glasgow Citizen*, Hugh MacDonald, encouraged his work, and Smith also sent a selection of poems to George Gilfillan with “a modest letter, soliciting criticism and advice” (qtd. in Henry, p. 44). Impressed by his talents, Gilfillan urged readers of the *Eclectic Review* to support the work of an “author, Mr. A. Smith, [who] is just twenty-one, and, from the age of ten, has been employed ten hours a-day in a commercial employment in Glasgow, and has only had the spare hours rescued from daily drudgery for cultivating his mind and muse.”⁴⁷ G. H. Lewes also printed a praiseful review of Smith’s work in *The Leader*, and Lewes, Herbert Spencer, George Meredith, and others began to seek ways to help Smith escape the warehouse. Smith later confessed to Gilfillan that he had seriously considered burning his manuscripts and taming “himself down to his destiny” (Watson and Watson, p. 156), so these kindly interventions may have come just in time.

Gilfillan suggested to him that a single long work might find a better reception than a series of shorter ones, and Smith accepted a London publisher’s offer of a hundred pounds for the copyright of *A Life-Drama*, which appeared in 1853 when its author was twenty-four.⁴⁸ The “life-drama”’s dissolving frames and reflections on poetry-in-the-making abound in dislocated but arresting metaphors, and many of its quasi-autobiographical interpolated songs, stories, dreams, interludes, and imagined encounters are strikingly beautiful:

Outside, the night is weeping like a girl
 At her seducer’s door, and still the rooms
 Run o’er with music, careless of her woe.
 I would not have my heart thus. (p. 68)⁴⁹

Its individual lyrics did not come together as a “drama,” however, and Smith might have been better served with a more miscellaneous volume after the manner of Tennyson’s 1832 or 1842 *Poems*. The work sparkled all the same with small kaleidoscopic analogues and anticipations of Barrett

Browning's *Aurora Leigh*⁵⁰ and the sensuously romantic medieval tales and lyrics of Morris' *Earthly Paradise*.⁵¹ This oneiric and slightly haunted sequence of reveries returns again and again to insoluble dilemmas of social injustice and interdicted ambition. In the following passage in the *Drama*'s opening section, for example, Walter decries the falsehood that

great and small, weakness and strength, are naught,
That each thing [is] equal in its sphere,
.....
This—this were easy to believe, were I
The planet that doth nightly wash the earth's
Fair sides with moonlight; not the shining worm,
But as I am—beaten and foiled, and shamed,
The arrow of my soul which I had shot
To bring down Fame, dissolved like shaft of mist,
This painted falsehood, this most damned lie,
Freezes me like a fiendish human face,
With all its features gathered in a sneer. (p. 3)⁵²

Walter also foresaw his begetter's literary fate:

No sooner was he hence than critic-worms
Were swarming on the body of his fame,
And thus they judged the dead: "This Poet was
An April tree whose vermeil-loaded boughs
Promised to Autumn apples juiced and red,
But never came to fruit." . . .
.....
"Poet he was not in the larger sense;
He could write pearls, but he could never write
A Poem round and perfect as a star." (p. 26)

A second underlying motif is the precarious cross-class companionship of Walter and his two *Beatrice*, a "Lady" and Violet, both avatars of learning and courtly grace. In a song in which Walter imagines that the "Lady" reciprocates his passion ("a heaven of tears and blushes was deep buried in my breast"), he also envisions the obstacles his love would face:

make *her* faith, my passion, a wide mark for scorn and sneers;
I could laugh a hollow laughter but for these hot bursting tears;
In the strong hand of my frenzy, laws and statues snapt like reeds,
And furious as a wounded bull I tore at all the creeds;
.....
For the curse of God gloomed o'er me like a bursting thunder-cloud.
(p. 22)⁵³

A third countervailing motif is the brutal blight of confinement in the “monstrous city’s heart” (p. 17). In the real “dark satanic mills”—industrial Glasgow—

a stream has turned
 The wheels of commerce, and come forth distained;
 And now trails slowly through a city’s heart,
 Drawing its filth as doth an evil soul
 Attract all evil things; putrid and black
 It mingles with the clear and stainless sea. (p. 117)

As slow he journeyed home, the wanderer saw
 The labouring fires come out against the dark,
 For with the night the country seemed on flame:
 Innumerable furnaces and pits,
 And gloomy holds, in which that bright slave, Fire,
 Doth pant and toil all day and night for man,
 Threw large and angry lustres on the sky,
 And shifting lights across the long black roads. (p. 92)

There was something perverse about W. E. Aytoun’s attempt to convict this pensive soul of “gross sensuality”—perhaps he was affronted by Walter’s attempt to strike up a conversation with a city prostitute, who tells him in round terms that he is less moral than she is!—for the work is suffused with a Keatsian sense of “the holiness of the heart’s affections”: “Oh, I would pledge / My heart, my blood, my brain to ease the earth / Of but one single pang!” (p. 72). The role of the poem’s heroines as bearers of its deepest conclusions also escaped the critics’ ken: Walter’s partners understand his lonely and poetically ambitious past, and share his belief (or hope) that

Nothing remains but Love, the world’s round mass
 It doth pervade, all forms of life it shares,
 The institutions that like moments pass
 Are but the shapes the masking spirit wears.
 Love is a sanctifier; ’tis a moon,
 Turning each dusk to silver. A pure light,
 Redeemer of all errors. (p. 137)

Aytoun’s caricature of Smith as an oafish costermonger was ignorant as well as gross, for it would be hard to find many “canonical” Victorian poets who published better lines than these at the age of twenty-four.⁵⁴

Aftermath

What happened to these actors in the Spasmodic drama in later life? Aytoun followed his highly successful parody two years later with the competent but pedestrian historical epic *Bothwell*, in which he upheld an ultramontane interpretation of Scottish history and maintained the innocence of Mary Queen of Scots.⁵⁵ The death of his wife in 1859 affected him deeply, and he died in 1865.

Firmilian effectively destroyed George Gilfillan's national literary reputation, but he continued to carry out the duties of an active urban ministry, wrote cogent criticism in his prefaces to *The English Poets* and biography of Robert Burns, and worked tirelessly until his death to foster the efforts and honor the memory of little-known Scottish writers, many of them working-class, and several of them women. Had he gone south (so to speak) with Carlyle, W. E. Henley, and Robert Louis Stevenson, he would have profited from the move in many ways. But he would also have forfeited his significance as a mentor, mediator, opponent of dogmatic anathemas that blighted ordinary people's lives, and preserver of the most humane currents of nineteenth-century Scottish culture.

It was through some of these later traces of an active and fulfilled life that I first encountered his work. Gilfillan encouraged D. E. Edwards to gather together the work of *A Hundred Scottish Poets* (Brechin, 1880), the best single resource we have for the study of late-nineteenth-century Scottish verse, and he wrote prefaces for three of the most significant working-class women poets whose work has survived in hard covers (Janet Hamilton, Ellen Johnston, and Elizabeth Campbell).⁵⁶ He also edited personally the writings of such other writers of humble origins as James Hillocks⁵⁷ and Alexander Anderson.⁵⁸

In my view the autobiographical *History of a Man* and unfashionably Miltonic *Night: A Poem* (1867) strongly merit rescue from oblivion. After canvassing the many ways in which scientists, theologians, lovers, and dreamers have responded to the profundity of night, Gilfillan ended the latter with a characteristically hopeful millenarian (and Shelleyan) vision of an end to the "dark night of the soul":

O, brother star, what sight is this I see?
 The lost world rolling into distant space,
 Dissolving, like a cloud, as it doth flee,
 So that no more mine eyes can find its place.
 Most strange, if hell at last has past away,
 And left behind it UNIVERSAL DAY! (p. 339)

D. G. Rossetti praised "Keith of Ravelston" and others of Sydney Dobell's later poems, and parts of *England in Time of War* (1856) have merit,⁵⁹

although Aytoun predictably attacked the work's departures from formulaic patriotism for their realism and lack of "heroism." Dobell's recurrent attacks of epilepsy and rheumatic fever continued, and he never developed the extensive notes he had made for the second and third parts of his projected trilogy, loosely modeled on the *Divine Comedy*, in which Balder came to "see the stars" and found ultimate redemption (*Thoughts on Art*, pp. 339-340).

Alexander Smith was the only "spasmodic" poet who later made a modest but steady part of his living as a writer. Literary friends helped him obtain a post as secretary (registrar) of the University of Edinburgh, and *City Poems* (1857) and *Edwin of Deira* (1861), an account of Christianity's arrival in Saxon Britain, found a measure of critical favor. In the years before he died of typhoid fever at thirty-eight, Smith also managed to write many essays for local periodicals which later appeared posthumously in hard covers, as well as two well-received autobiographical novels: *Alfred Hagar's Household*, and *Miss Oona McQuarrie* (both in 1866).⁶⁰ The ardent reader and sensitive youth became a calm and companionable man who liked to entertain friends with his wife Flora Macdonald, and his biographer Thomas Brisbane testified to his character as a companion and confidant: "If you were happy enough to [have him to yourself for a while], you could not but love him for the rest of your life" (p. 67).⁶¹

Smith's unjustly neglected collections of essays *Dreamthorpe* (1863), *A Summer in Skye* (2 vols.; London, 1865), and *Last Leaves* (Edinburgh, 1868) are infused with quiet sentiment and precise, understated description. In *Last Leaves*, he comments quietly but firmly on the the cycles of fashion which had so affected the reputation of Sydney Dobell and himself:

The reviews are powerful, but they are not omnipotent; and a man's work exists, after the reviewers have said their best and their worst about it, precisely as it is. . . . [T]here is nothing more curious than the fluctuation of literary reputations. A poet comes into fashion very much as crinoline came into fashion, is universally quoted as crinoline was universally worn, and in due time makes way for a new favourite. . . . [T]he oblivion to which the "Spasmodic School" has been consigned for the last few years has been to a considerable extent undeserved. . . . In the courts of law, when a man conceives that justice has not been done, it is competent for him to call for a new trial. In the interest of Sydney Dobell, I move for a new trial in the courts of criticism. (pp. 172-175)

Since he died so young, we do not know whether Smith hoped to

write more poetry, but it is sad to read his biographer's apologies for his poetry and expressions of gratitude for Aytoun's later willingness to help publish his prose. For his part, Smith had already published a considered and equable response to the "courts of law" when he was only twenty-four:

"whether crowned or crownless, when I fall,
It matters not, so as God's work is done.
I've learned to prize the quiet lightning-deed,
Not the applauding thunder at its heels,
Which men call Fame." (*A Life-Drama*, p. 138)

Conclusion

In rough alphabetical order, one might identify traces and variants of the "extravagant" attributes Aytoun parodied in Matthew Arnold's *Empedocles on Etna* (1852, withdrawn from the 1853 edition); Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1857); Robert Browning's early studies of "madhouse cells" and criminals, as well as *Paracelsus*, *Sordello*, and the failed verse-drama *Strafford*; Carlyle's crypto-autobiographical excursions in *Sartor Resartus*; Clough's verse-novel *Amours de Voyage* (1858) and *Dipsychus* (posthumous, 1865); Ruskin's vatic pronouncements and declamations in "The Nature of Gothic" and *Unto This Last* (1853 and 1864); and Tennyson's *Maud*, "Mariana," "Locksley Hall," "Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind," *The Princess*, and *In Memoriam*. Good historical company that.

Another obvious candidate for "spasmody" was the William Morris of the *Oxford and Cambridge* prose romances (1856) and the Froissartian poems of *The Defence of Guenevere* (1859). Reviewers especially decried "raw" and "unintelligible" lyrics such as "The Wind," and Morris hoped to follow the *Defence* with the never-completed *Scenes from the Fall of Troy*, a verse-drama filled with "spasmodic" violence and expressions of erotic longing. Once one inquired into its symptoms and etiology, in fact, the malady seems already to have tainted Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), R. H. Horne's *Orion* (1843), George Meredith's first volume of *Poems* (1851), and Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel" (1850 ff.) and "Last Confession" (first draft 1849), as well as Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* (1866).

Aytoun's and Arnold's terrible swift swords gave pause to several of these writers, of course, but they cut their deepest swathes in the hopes of the less well-connected. Others found it sufficient to furnish their works with better-defined generic boundaries or more abstruse classical or medieval plots. Tennyson, for example, took refuge in the elaborate patriotic historicist architectonic of the *Idylls of the King*; Browning buried his villains and miscreants in the learnedly displaced Renaissance scaffolding of

The Ring and the Book; and Morris invoked Chaucer as the patron saint of his twenty-four exquisitely counterbalanced classical and medieval verse-narratives in *The Earthly Paradise*.

Other “spasmodic” impulses migrated into fiction, most conspicuously the “sensation fiction” of the 1860s, but the shadow-movement’s preoccupations with romantic populism, formal experimentation, and unguarded honesty endured. Aytoun played successfully to a receptive claque, but subsequent generations have largely consigned his sensibilities to a literary and political backwater. Then as now, it was easier to be a clever critic than it was to write a memorable poem.

More dispiriting were the enduring triumphs of the iron laws of class and education that Aytoun exploited. No acknowledged “major” poet of Victorian Britain came from working- or lower-middle-class origins,⁶² and none of the “spasmodists” is likely to gain more than token entry into any twenty-first-century anthologies. Even here, however, Dobell, Smith and the others might have found a measure of vindication in the vast palette of subsequent generations’ preoccupations with despair, recovery, aberrance, marginality, and self-examination—a palette they helped, in the face of withering critical abuse, to configure.

Notes

- 1 Richard Cronin, “The Spasmodics,” *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman, and Antony Harrison (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 299. For other accounts of this episode in literary history, see Jerome Buckley, *The Victorian Temper* (New York: Random House, 1964), chap. 3; Hallman Bell Byrant, “The Spasmodic School: A Study of a Victorian Literary Phenomenon,” diss., Vanderbilt Univ., 1968; James C. Work, “A Study of the Hero in the Spasmodic Dramas,” diss., Univ. of New Mexico, 1973; and Mark Weinstein, *William Edmondstoune Aytoun and the Spasmodic Controversy* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1965).
- 2 Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 176-192.
- 3 Ebenezer Jones, *The Land Monopoly: The Suffering and Demoralization Caused by It; & the Justice and Expediency of its Abolition* (London, 1849); Henry George, *Progress and Poverty* (San Francisco, 1879).
- 4 Carlyle had first used the term in an 1838 essay on Walter Scott, in which he dispatched recent Romantic literature as “the sickliest of recorded ages, when British literature lay all puking and sprawling in Werterism (sic), Byronism, and other Sentimentalism tearful or spasmodic (fruit of internal wind)” (*The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, Vol. 29, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* [New York: Scribner’s, 1904], 4:39). Weinstein (p. 107) notes that the term “spasmodic” was probably suggested to Aytoun by an article by Charles Kingsley, “Thoughts on Shelley and Byron,” in *Fraser’s Magazine* (October 1853): 452-466. R. H. Horne, in “Robert Browning and J. W. Marston,” *A New Spirit of the Age* (London, 1907; orig. London, 1844), gives his

- view that Browning's *Strafford* and Marston's *Patrician's Daughter* are "examples of men of genius going astray, the one turning tragedy into a spasmodic skeleton, the other . . . wounding Art with real-life weapons" (pp. 359-360).
- 5 Two poets of working-class social status were Ebenezer Jones, an office clerk and Chartist, whose reactions to a strictly puritan education prompted an interest in varied emotions expressed in *Studies of Sensation and Event* (1843), and Gerald Massey, the son of a canal boatman who began work in a silk factory at eight, and the author of the radical *Voices of Freedom and Lyrics of Love* (1851), as well as *The Ballad of Babe Christabel, with other Lyrical Poems* (1854), *Havelock's March and Other Poems* (1861) and *My Lyrical Life: Poems Old and New* (1889). This essay concentrates on Dobell and Smith because these poets were the most immediate targets of Aytoun's satire.
 - 6 In addition to the accounts listed in note 1, information on Aytoun's life appears in Theodore Martin, *Memoir of William Edmondstoune Aytoun, D.C.L.* (Edinburgh, 1867). The best account is Weinstein, *William Edmondstoune Aytoun*, and brief surveys appear in Mark Weinstein, "William Edmonstone Aytoun," *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Detroit: Gale, 1984), 32:28-32, and Thomas Cooksey, "William Edmondstoune Aytoun," *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Detroit: Gale, 1996), 159:3-8.
 - 7 William Edmondstoune Aytoun, *Poland, Homer, and Other Poems* (Edinburgh, 1832). See Thomas McLean, "William Aytoun's 'Poland': 1832-1849," *The Legacy of History*, ed. Teresa Bela and Zygmunt Mazur (Krakow: Jagiellonian Univ. Press, 2003).
 - 8 A Layman of the Church, *The Drummond Schism Examined and Exposed* (Edinburgh, 1842), p. 17.
 - 9 James Lorimer, *Studies—National and International* (Edinburgh, 1890), pp. 19-20.
 - 10 Aytoun consolidated an already influential association with *Blackwood's* when he married the editor's daughter in 1849. Jane Emily Wilson Aytoun was the daughter of John Wilson, noted under the penname "Christopher North" for his austere traditionalism and well-known attacks on the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. (It was also in *Blackwood's* that another reviewer, John Gibson Lockhart, had condemned Leigh Hunt and the "Cockney School of Poetry" to which he allegedly belonged).
 - 11 *Blackwood's* 78 (1855): 319-320; 71 (1852): 217; and 81(1857): 34.
 - 12 "Firmilian: A Tragedy," *Blackwood's* 75 (1854): 533-551.
 - 13 *Blackwood's* 75 (1854): 545.
 - 14 Richard Cronin, "The Spasmodics," p. 295.
 - 15 *Blackwood's* 56 (1844): 289.
 - 16 *The Eclectic Review* 61 (1850): 270.
 - 17 *Blackwood's* 75 (1854): 304-305; italics mine.
 - 18 *Blackwood's* 75 (1854): 551.
 - 19 Martin, pp. 146-147: "It is very curious, when you sit down to write this sort of thing, to find how very closely some of the passages approximate to good poetry."
 - 20 *Firmilian: or, The Student of Badajoz. A Spasmodic Tragedy* (Edinburgh, 1849), pp. viii-x.
 - 21 Gilfillan's works are permeated with astronomical metaphors, and one of his early

- books had been *The Christian Bearings of Astronomy* (Dundee, 1848).
- 22 Robert A. Watson and Elizabeth S. Watson, *George Gilfillan: Letters and Journals, with Memoir* (London, 1892); David Macrae, *George Gilfillan: Anecdotes and Reminiscences* (Glasgow, 1891); Francis Fennell, "George Gilfillan: A Biographical and Critical Study," diss., Northwestern, 1968; Glyn Pursglove, "George Gilfillan," *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Detroit: Gale, 1994), 144:117-126. Pursglove's bibliography is impressive, and partial lists are also provided by Macrae, Watson, and Fennell.
 - 23 A series of Secessionist sects proliferated in the nineteenth century, before these joined with the Free Church in the early twentieth century. The Secessionists adhered strictly to the Westminster Confession and a literal interpretation of the Bible.
 - 24 Other works included *The Bards of the Bible* (1851), *Martyrs and Heroes of the Scottish Covenant* (1852), *Christianity and Our Era* (1857), *Alpha and Omega* (2 vols., 1860), *Remoter Stars in the Church Sky* (1867), and *Modern Christian Heroes* (1869).
 - 25 Sydney Dobell, *Palladium*, July 1850, quoted in Watson and Watson, pp. 72-73.
 - 26 Macrae, p. 89. "Often in the pulpit he quoted the line—'Tis more light and fuller that we want.' He said himself, 'Advance is the great law of the Christian life, as well as of the universe. All things in nature and history go forward.'"
 - 27 He also published an anti-slavery treatise, *The Debasing and Demoralizing Influences of Slavery*, in 1860.
 - 28 "I am amazed at the notion that the Indian should take our rule as a providential necessity, and as better than their own could be. So, I suppose, should the Scotch have done in Wallace's days. The Indians cannot be expected to see matters with our eyes, and perhaps may prefer their own wild freedom to our gold-chained bondage" (Watson and Watson, p. 348).
 - 29 Other literary works included *The Poetical Works of Robert Burns*, 2 vols., memoir and notes by George Gilfillan (Edinburgh, 1856); editions of Pope, Henry Kirke White, Mark Akenside, Crashaw, Scott, Spenser, Chaucer, Edmund Waller, Sir Thomas Wyatt, Joseph Addison, and many others published by John Nichol.
 - 30 W. R. Nicoll, ed., *A Gallery of Literary Portraits by George Gilfillan* (London: J. M. Dent, 1909), p. vii.
 - 31 *The History of a Man*, p. 253. He remarked in his journal in 1864 that "I wish I had preserved a complete list of all the books and MSS. sent me since 1846 when I became known as a critic, with brief notes of their authors' character, &c. It was a . . . regular Noah's ark of all kinds of clean and unclean animals—eagles, lions, owls, asses, serpents, and a few vermin for variety" (Watson and Watson, p. 386). See also *The History of a Man*, pp. 253-254.
 - 32 George Gilfillan, "Tenth Bundle of Books," *Hogg's Instructor* 15 (1853): 345.
 - 33 Note his disillusioned comments on patronage, in *The History of A Man*, p. 254.
 - 34 T. Hall Caine, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Boston, 1898), p. 195. William Fredeman's 2002 edition of the first volumes of D. G. Rossetti's *Letters* has found many inaccuracies in Caine's transcriptions, however, so knowledge of Rossetti's exact wording may await the remaining volumes of his edition.
 - 35 Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. Samuel Lipman (Yale Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 9-10.

- 36 He published several poems in *The People's Journal*, including "A Village Colloquy" (1847).
- 37 *Life and Letters of Sydney Dobell*, edited by E[mily] J[olly] (London, 1878), 2:71-72; hereafter cited as Jolly. A brief discussion of Dobell appears in Mark Weinstein, "Sydney Dobell," *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Detroit: Gale, 1984), 32:108-111.
- 38 Jerome Thrale, "Sydney Dobell: A Spasmodic Poet," diss., Northwestern Univ., 1953, pp. 46-48.
- 39 As an adolescent he had followed the career of Fergus O'Connor with interest, disapproving of his eventual compromises with authority (Jolly, 1:44-45).
- 40 Jolly, 1:282. The final break occurred in 1853, when Dobell would have been in the final stages of his poem.
- 41 "Recent Poetry," *Chambers' Journal* 2, no. 27 (July 1854): 27.
- 42 "Balder," *Athenaeum*, no. 1368, n. s. (January 14, 1854): 49-50.
- 43 "Contemporary Literature," *Westminster Review* 61, no. 122 (April 1854): 626.
- 44 Sydney Dobell, *Balder* (London, 1854), p. 282.
- 45 Sydney Dobell, *Thoughts on Art, Philosophy and Religion*, ed. John Nichol (London, 1876), p. 340, "then the man who was once called Balder, but now _____, arose with his wife to go unto the Lord that he might heal the scar upon her breast."
- 46 William Claud Henry, "A Study of Alexander Smith and His Reputation as a Spasmodic Writer," diss., Northwestern Univ., 1942. Smith is the only "Spasmodic poet" who has drawn much critical attention. Other considerations of Smith's work appear in Thomas Brisbane, *The Early Years of Alexander Smith* (London, 1869); Mark Weinstein, "Alexander Smith," *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Detroit: Gale, 1984), 32:249-254; and Richard Cronin, "Alexander Smith and the Poetry of Displacement," *VP* 28 (1990): 129-145.
- 47 George Gilfillan, "Recent Poetry," *Eclectic Review* n. s. 2 (October 1851): 458.
- 48 For an account of the efforts to help Smith find a publisher, see Henry, pp. 53-55.
- 49 *The Poems of Alexander Smith* (London, 1903), p. 68. Many of Smith's images were astronomical, a feature which would naturally have appealed to Gilfillan.
- 50 Comparisons with *Aurora Leigh* include analogies between Violet's literary insights into the state of Walter's soul, and Romney's acquaintance with Aurora's spiritual travail through her writings. Both works also concluded with scenes in which reunited lovers contemplate the heavens and dedicate themselves to a higher shared purpose.
- 51 For example, "Ogier the Dane," and "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon."
- 52 Page number references are to *The Poetical Works of Alexander Smith*, ed. William Sinclair (Edinburgh: W. P. Nimmo, 1909). See also p. 70, in which Walter tells his friend that "I'm wretched, Edward! . . . I see an unreach'd heaven of young desire / Shine through my hopeless tears. . . . I rot upon the waters when my prow / Should grate the golden isles."
- 53 Liaisons between high- and lowborn persons also appeared in other literature of the period—Morris' "Gertha's Lovers," for example, in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (1856)—but such love was usually ill-fated, as in Tennyson's 1842 "Locksley Hall."

- 55 Admired by the Pre-Raphaelites, *A Life-Drama* influenced William Morris (as Dobell's *Roman* anticipated the theme of *A Dream of John Ball*).
- 56 William Edmondstoune Aytoun, *Bothwell* (Edinburgh, 1856). Compare Swinburne's *Mary Stuart: A Tragedy*.
- 56 Janet Hamilton, *Poems and Ballads*, intro. by Gilfillan (Glasgow, 1868); Ellen Johnston, *Autobiography, Poems and Songs* (Glasgow, 1867); Elizabeth Campbell, *Songs of My Pilgrimage*, ed. and intro. by Gilfillan (Edinburgh, 1875).
- 57 James Hillocks, *Life Struggles: An Autobiographic Record of The Earlier Trials and Later Triumphs of the Rev. James Inches Hillocks*, ed. with remarks, by the Rev. George Gilfillan (Glasgow, 1876). The author was a Scotsman who described himself as one whose "position in the great 'Life Drama' has never been very exalted, socially at least."
- 58 Alexander Anderson, *The Two Angels and Other Poems*, intro. by George Gilfillan (London, 1877).
- 59 Sydney Dobell, *England in Time of War* (London, 1856). Dobell also co-published a volume with Alexander Smith, *Sonnets on the War* (London, 1855).
- 61 Alexander Smith, *Alfred Hagart's Household* and *Miss Oona McQuarrie* (London, 1866); published in separate volumes in Boston, 1865 and 1866.
- 62 Of Smith's death, Brisbane remarked that "still deeper was he mourned by his relatives and numerous personal friends; for he had been a truly good, genial, generous, loving and most loveable man."
- 63 George Meredith, the son of a bankrupt tailor, was a partial exception, but a family legacy provided him with a good education.