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SPASMODIC BODIES AND VICTORIAN POETICS: BIOLOGY, MASCULINITY, AND MODERNITY IN SPASMODIC POETRY

By

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Abstract

Spasmodic Bodies and Victorian Poetics: Biology, Masculinity, and Modernity in Spasmodic Poetry

by

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Spasmodic poetry, a loosely-defined type of long, intense verse that flowered briefly in the early 1850s, implies an embodied poetics of disruption, pathology and intensity. With their trademark linguistic bombast, piles of metaphors, and passionate subjectivity, Spasmodic poems variously intoxicated and offended Victorian audiences. The vehemence of the reaction to Spasmodicism makes sense when Spasmodic poetry is read against two crucial nineteenth-century contexts: biology and poetry. On the one hand, Victorian debates over poetry centered on the changing role of the poet from a Romantic prophet to a more socially-oriented Victorian man of letters. Critics debated the usefulness of personal, emotive verse for the new urbanized, technologized, imperial Britain. Definitions of masculinity also shifted towards a more restrained, athletic model, capable above all of great self-control. At the same time, medical science laid new emphasis on the body as a de- hierarchized system of nervous centers. Mind, soul and being were understood as material; the body became the self. Spasms, which appear in medical literature as a nervous pathology, undercut the body's ability to maintain and control itself. Equally threatening to rhetorics of masculinity and literature, Spasmodicism suggested an

embodied poetics of failed will, introspection, and effeminacy. These poets were thus laughed out of countenance by hostile critics who coined the parodic term "Spasmodic," a nickname that has stuck. This project considers the original reception of Spasmodic poetry in an attempt to recover the ways in which the Spasmodics were central to heated Victorian issues of contemporary poetry, gender, and physicality. Further, this project posits that spasms, as embodied bursts of both hyper-awareness and animalistic materiality, figure as nineteenth-century responses to modernity and emergent concerns about the limits of discipline, consciousness and language.

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Introduction: On Being Spasmodic

In *Great Expectations*, Pip returns after an extended absence to the town of his youth. Here, his discomfort with his new status as a gentleman is exposed by the mockery of Trabb's boy, a local apprentice:

> Casting my eyes along the street at a certain point of my progress, I beheld Trabb's boy approaching, lashing himself with an empty blue bag. Deeming that a serene and unconscious contemplation of him would best beseem me, and would be most likely to quell his evil mind, I advanced with that expression of countenance, and was rather congratulating myself on my success, when suddenly the knees of Trabb's boy smote together, his hair uprose, his cap fell off, he trembled violently in every limb, staggered out into the road, and crying to the populace, "Hold me! I'm so frightened!" feigned to be in a paroxysm of terror and contrition, occasioned by the dignity of my appearance. (245)

Trabb's boy plays on the fissures in Pip's demeanor: it is Pip's awareness of his own dignified bearing, his consciousness that he ought to seem "unconscious," that shows him not quite a born gentleman. Adult Pip, the narrator, concludes his reminiscence of the humiliating occasion by admitting defeat: "I really do not even now see what I could have done save endure" (246).

Trabb's boy's mockery is all the more effective for its physical manifestations—the violent trembling and the paroxysms. When he sees Pip, he

becomes spasmodic. Although Dickens does not use the word specifically, "spasmodic" was a popular mid- nineteenth-century medical and literary adjective for a sudden, uncontrollable interruption of the *status quo*. The physical disarray of a spasmodic disorder is here the most effective way to mock a failed attempt at self-presentation. Spasmodic behavior appears as the opposite of normative gentlemanly behavior. As such, it is associated with material absurdity, shame and emasculation (for Pip), and laughter (for everyone else).

This study asks what it means, in the mid-nineteenth century, to be spasmodic. Further, what has this to do with the Spasmodic poets, who wrote long, dramatic poetry, marked by linguistic and emotional excess, which became popular in the late 1830s to mid-1850s? Though most of these poems had a similar plot—an isolated poet/genius feels himself superior to normative social values while struggling to write a poem that would be socially recognized as a masterpiece—Spasmodic poems tended to be fragmented and chaotic. Their plots were hard to follow and were often subordinated to their spontaneous, gorgeous metaphors and images. Spasmodic work emphasized genius, isolation, heroics, imagination, and spontaneous emotional expression. After the writers of this sub-genre were labeled "Spasmodic" by hostile reviewers, their considerable popularity began to wane. Since then, they have largely appeared only rarely in literary criticism, and almost always as the fools of nineteenth-century verse—absurd and unwittingly funny.

I argue that the literary reaction against the Spasmodics can be understood in much the same terms as Trabb's boy's attack on Pip. Both Pip and the Spasmodics bear a tenuous relationship to proper gentlemanly behavior: both were understood to

be from humbler origins than their attire suggested, both were understood to be somewhat ridiculous in their self-posturing. Like Pip, many of the major Spasmodic poets were of working class origins, further troubling their relationship to high art and gentlemanly privilege. Alexander Smith and Sydney Dobell, the first poets to be labeled "Spasmodic," came from mercantile backgrounds: Smith was a textile mechanic and Dobell a wine merchant. P.J. Bailey, whose poetry inspired the so-called Spasmodic movement, was the son of a hosiery manufacturer. Coventry Patmore dismissed their popularity by attributing it to "a vulgar vanity of connoisseurship" cultivated by the working classes ("New Poets" 340; see also my Chapter One).

Pip's troubled walk down a public street in gentleman's clothes echoes the critical perception that the Spasmodics, aping Romantic passions, were simply playing dress-up. Finally, both Pip and the Spasmodics were too self-conscious to pull off the trick of a gentlemanly demeanor. Instead of the "serene and unconscious" scene Pip tries for, he gets Trabb's boy's spasmodic mockery, just as editions of passionately earnest Spasmodic poetry were greeted with parodic send-ups and amused derisions from literary critics. One such critic, William Edmondstoune Aytoun, equates the Spasmodic poet to "the painter of the tavern sign-post" who compares his commercial drawings with the work of Raphael ("Firmilian" 534). The similarity of Trabb's boy's mockery to the reception of Spasmodic poems shows us that we can move these reviled poets and poems from the margins of poetic acceptability to the center of the rich nineteenth-century discourse on masculinity,

social shame, and epileptic medical disorder—all of which are apparent in Trabb's boy's mockery, Pip's dilemma, and the so-called Spasmodic poets.

P.J. Bailey's *Festus* (1839) is held to be the parent text of Spasmodicism. A meandering, Miltonic tale of Festus and his tutor Satan, *Festus* grew from 8,000 lines in the original edition to 40,000 lines more than 40 editions later. Almost everything that Bailey wrote became a part of the poem. Although *Festus* exemplifies the lack of cohesion that characterizes Spasmodic poetry, I chose to focus on three other poets, the most popular Spasmodics poets and their most infamous poems: J. Westland Marston's *Gerald* (1842), Alexander Smith's *A Life-Drama* (1852), and Sydney Dobells's *Balder* (1854). These three poets and poems were at the hot center of the debate about Spasmodic verse, a debate that peaked in the mid-1850s and early 1860s. Their poems best represent what Spasmodic poetry meant to critics, readers and writers in the middle of the nineteenth century.

A Life-Drama and *Balder* are the most classically Spasmodic, by which I mean that both the poetry and the critical reaction to it exemplified Spasmodic social and textual behavior. The poems' lack of cohesion and overt emphasis on language for the sake of language were critically represented as moral sins heralding socially corrosive effeminacy and nervous disease. Between the luxurious sensual abandon of Smith's poem and the bewildering complexity of Dobell's psychological ruminations in verse on murder, madness, and ambition, these two poets represent the dominant notes of the Spasmodic school, whose roots lie with Milton, and more immediately Byron and Keats. As nineteenth-century literary and social critics called on writers to lose the insistent individuality and emotional intensity of Byron and Keats in favor of

a more restrained vision of social order, the Spasmodic poets became one of the sites through which Victorians attempted to purge the taint of pathological solipsism and sensuality.

Writing of the Spasmodics in *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, Isobel Armstrong explains that "their works exist in a strange, turbulent parallel to the texts of [canonical] poets, like a dream work" (169). However, I argue throughout this dissertation that the Spasmodics were in fact, contrary to Armstrong's argument, at the very center of Victorian discourses on poetry and society. Too passionate and too fragmentary for conventional taste, Spasmodic verse fell out of favor as Victorian aesthetics moved away from the Romantic vision of the suffering, isolated genius and towards a socially-integrated vision of self-denial, work, and projects of state. The social and literary disjunction created by this aesthetic shift is the necessary context for understanding the Spasmodics. They tried to discover ways of bonding the old Romantic and new Victorian traditions: the poet-heroes of their poems grapple seriously, and often fatally, with their need, on the one hand, to express the intense passions that come upon them and which mark them as different from everyone else and, on the other hand, with their need for discipline and social participation. Their fragmentation can be read as a response to modernity, and the jostling rhythms of their poems can be understood as a way of "reading" an increasingly disjointed experience of modernity.

The Spasmodics participated vigorously in debates over the nature of verse in the middle of the nineteenth century. Antony Harrison and Isobel Armstrong have both argued that Arnold's decision to withdraw the psychologically complex

"Empedocles on Etna" from his collected works was a response to what he saw as the dangerous, introspective egotism—"the dialogue of the mind with itself"—popularized by Smith's *A Life-Drama* and other Spasmodic works. Arnold's gesture is a well-remembered literary moment in which the poet aligns himself against Romantic solipsism. We tend, however, to forget the centrality of the Spasmodics to the debate over whether individual interiority, as suggested by Spasmodic poems, or great actions, as urged by Arnold, were the proper vehicles for poetic expression. In fact, it is easy to simplify the terms of this debate, easy to cast the Spasmodics' subjectivity as the inverse of Arnold's objectivity. "Empedocles on Etna," however, was arguably a Spasmodic poem, while the Dobell often spoke out against self-interestedness. Dobell's *Balder*—the book-length rumination of an isolated poet who slowly goes mad—was often denigrated for the hero's obsessive self-referentiality. Dobell, however, intended the poem as a warning against such unrelenting self-consciousness, writing in his preface that his character symbolized "a predominant intellectual misfortune of our day" (*Poetical Works* 5). As literary history demonstrates, Dobell's explanation was ignored and his poem failed to sustain a sympathetic audience, just as Arnold's "Empedocles on Etna" is rarely read in its Spasmodic context.

In recent years, however, an increasingly sympathetic attention has been paid to the Spasmodics. An understanding of their contributions to Victorian poetics is emerging, suggesting that the "turbulent parallel" Spasmodic poetry draws to canonical poetry may be able to shed new light on the landscape of Victorian poetry

and culture.[1] The context in which the Spasmodics have suddenly become "readable" again has much to do with the literary trends that also underwrite this dissertation. That is, recent attention to queer theory, studies of masculinity, and cross-disciplinary studies of the body and medicine in literature have created an environment in which the Spasmodics throw into relief modern definitions of sexuality, gender and physicality. Because these writers operated between Romantic ideals of the Keatsian yearner and the virile Byronic hero and the Victorian ideals of the restrained gentleman, Spasmodic poems offer an enlightening new way of reading the schisms in Victorian conceptions of gender—a cultural turn that has become prominent in the past few decades. This dissertation considers ongoing investigations into gender as illuminated by the Spasmodic poets and their critics.

Another explanation for the resurgence of interest in Spasmodic poetry lies in an increasing willingness on the part of literary scholars to look past and through generic and periodic divisions. Susan J. Wolfson's 2002 article "Our Puny Boundaries: Why the Craving for Carving Up the Nineteenth Century" is representative of this trend in reminding us that Victorians did not experience themselves as dramatically divided from the Romantics. Wordsworth's *Prelude*, usually considered typically Romantic, was published in1850, while "Victorian" poets avidly read, admired, and were influenced by "Romantic" works. The Spasmodics, combining as they did elements of Keats, Byron, and Shelley, have seemed to many modern critics historically out of place in the company of Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold, despite the fact that all three of these canonical Victorian

[1] A panel on the Spasmodics ran at the 2003 Modern Language Convention annual conference, and a special edition of *Victorian Poetry* (forthcoming) will be dedicated to the Spasmodics.

poets were at one time or another accused of Spasmodicism. However, if we consider Romantic and Victorian poetry to be more continuous than separable, it becomes easier to see how Spasmodic poetry illuminates some of the continuities between Romantic and Victorian literature hidden by our current system of periodization. Collapsing firm divisions between these two periods also allows us to read the Spasmodics within the larger trajectory of mid-nineteenth-century verse, as writers and critics debated the merits of their poetic inheritance from the poets of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In this way, Spasmodic poetry figures crucially in nineteenth-century debates over the social morality and poetic suitability of self-referentiality, emotional intensity, the role of the poet in society and the marketplace, and the limits of poetic language.

Similarly, Dino Franco Felluga's recent article, "Novel Poetry: Transgressing the Law of Genre," attests to current attempts to cross genres and study the novel and the poem side by side. While nineteenth-century critics often reinforced generic differences to keep poetry pure and untainted by the marketplace, politics, and social concerns, efforts in modern scholarship to efface the high-brow/low-brow dichotomy in literature have resulted in an increased understanding of poetry as a form no less bound than the novel to cultural, social, political, and economic movements (Felluga 49, and my Chapter Four). The Spasmodics are newly visible against this background because of the ways their book-length poems interrogate subjectivity in the particular social climate of the mid-nineteenth century, when urbanization threatened to change established understandings of population and

economy, when masculinity was being redefined in the context of the Crimean War, and when science was altering established religious and medical conventions.

Interdisciplinary studies also open possibilities for new understandings of the Spasmodic poets. Links between medical and literary discourse have been emerging in both disciplines recently. In 1996, The Program in Narrative Medicine was established in the Department of Medicine at Columbia University, with the idea of drawing on literature to further the education of health professionals. The journal *Literature and Medicine*, published at Columbia, brings together scholarly work from literary theorists, health professionals and cultural historians. This dissertation works in the spirit of these interdisciplinary endeavors to explore the links between biology and poetry illuminated by the Spasmodics.

Most critical explanations for the denigration of the Spasmodics (such as those from Jerome Buckley in *The Victorian Temper* or Antony Harrison in *Victorian Poets and Romantic Poems: Intertextuaity and Ideology*) insist that their poems are forgotten because they just weren't very good. These critics follow in the tradition of contemporary reviewers, finding aesthetic fault with overblown rhetoric and heaps of unintegrated metaphors. Perhaps the most compelling answer to the question of why we are again becoming interested in the Spasmodics has to do with the shifting role of qualitative judgments in literary criticism. Aesthetic worth becomes outmoded as a critical category, while cultural contextualization is more and more widely accepted as a register of literary worth. That is, one can cogently argue that studying the Spasmodics helps us understand the complexity of Victorian poetics without having recourse to the sticky question of whether or not they ever wrote any good poetry.

The Spasmodic poets, whose name itself implies hideously convulsing verse, may be uniquely legible to us because of this shift away from aesthetics.

This project, too, does not question the Spasmodics' literary worth (or lack thereof). I do, however, wish to place a great deal of emphasis on the crucial role that aesthetic valuation played in the literary history of the Spasmodics. I posit that the Spasmodics were cast so vigorously out of favor because they had a bad name, a name that implied an ugliness or deformity of verse, body, and mind. After Charles Kingsley used "spasmodic" to describe their verse in 1853, and especially after Aytoun picked up this useful label in his 1854 book-length parody, *Firmilian, a Spasmodic Tragedy*, the considerable popularity of these poets began to wane. No major Spasmodic compositions were published after this time, and the careers of Sydney Dobell and Alexander Smith were effectively ended. Their books continued to sell, but their reputations were tainted. They never recovered.

More than any other concern, this dissertation is driven by the question, why was spasmodicism so threatening? The answer, teased out in the following chapters, is that "spasmodic" was becoming, in the middle of the nineteenth century, a medical term for all of the ways the body could go wrong. Medical research into pathology, instead of addressing itself to questions of mind, soul, God and morality, refocused on the body and its regulatory systems. A physical basis for mind was being articulated, and the body was suddenly elevated to an importance that was all the more precarious for not being fully understood. Explanations of the world moved from objectivity to subjectivity: the big questions were no longer about the nature of reality, however that was understood, but about the nature of perception. And this shift meant a growing

attention to the body as the origin of perception and the organ of experience. The poetic concern for perception and sensuousness, initiated by the Romantics, became overtly threatening in the face of spasmodic pathologies that undermined the links between the world and the perceptive self by which it was mediated. If nervous spasms could suddenly overwhelm body, mind and will, they could disable and fracture one's experience of "reality," just as Spasmodic poetry scandalized notions of linear plot with fragmented metaphors and images. Here, Spasmodic poetry prefigures the Decadent and early modernist understanding of reality as a fragmented stream of sensory experience, an understanding that seemed both immoral and insane to many Victorians critics and doctors.

In the nineteenth century, medical science began to articulate a de-hierarchicalized body. No longer was the soul, or even the brain, the lone site of physical or mental power. The central nervous system was understood to be ever more de-centralized, and to work on the volatile principle of energy rather than the unified dictates of the conscious will. The threat of this model is its suggestion that the body could easily fragment into its constituent parts. If the will, if a sound mind, were not enough to keep things together, the possibility of erratic and uncontrolled behavior seems inevitable. This was confirmed when a class of "spasmodic" medical disorders was articulated in the 1850s and 60s. Thus, the dominant expression of ill health became not the silent sickbed or the ravaged leper, but the epileptic.

This had severe repercussions for nineteenth-century understandings of masculinity. Increasingly, the nineteenth-century gentleman was marked by will-power, self-control, and decisive action. In order to participate in such projects of

state as the Crimean War and other colonial efforts, the Victorian man must be above all steadfast. As Pip recognizes, but cannot quite realize, the bedrock of the proper gentleman's ease is his lack of self-consciousness. Spasmodic medical disorders undermine masculine self-control. The spontaneous, unwilled, purposeless actions of a spasmodic muscle or limb bypass will altogether. Spasms force on the sufferer and his audience an awareness of the body as brute, uncontrollable, and non-(as opposed to ir-)rational. Spasms, as random physicality unmediated by the will, undermine mid-Victorian attempts to banish solipsism in favor of self-control and repression; in fact, spasms demand scrutiny of the self on an anatomical level, as consciousness struggles to control the body's reactions. Someone who gives in to spasmodicism, then, is emasculated by the over-powering presence of a materiality that draws his self-control into question. Meanwhile, as schools began to emphasize sports, and physical fitness began to take on its modern meaning of a well-conditioned and well-controlled body, the spasmodic has no way of disciplining his misfiring nerves. The helpless self-awareness of the pathologically spasmodic patient draws the social construction of gender into question, just as the Spasmodic poet-hero's passionate "dialogue of the mind with itself" fragments Arnold's vision of verse as a universally moving celebration of great historical acts. In "Characteristics" (1831), a denunciation of self-consciousness as a key moral failure eroding the century's social, religious and literary tone, Carlyle illuminates the links between medical inquiry into the minute workings of the body and mental inquiry into the subtle moods and desires of one's own mind: "[h]ad Adam remained in Paradise [without self-knowledge], there had been no anatomy and no Metaphysics" (3).

By naming poets and poems Spasmodic, critics emphasize anatomy, particularly anatomy gone wrong. As a result, the taint of biology and pathology destroyed the reputations and careers of the Spasmodics. This material taint overrides and colors any attempt, contemporary or modern, to arrive at a judgment on the quality of their verse. However, rather than claiming that the Spasmodics were "better" writers than their association with sickness has allowed, I want instead to tease out the overlapping discourses of medical science, poetics and gender that congealed around the Spasmodics in the late 1850s and led to their literary demise. This will, I hope, in spite of their marginalization, demonstrate that the Spasmodics were key to the shifting conceptions of the body, masculinity, modernity and interiority in high Victorian culture, and that their poems manifest these shifts.

My chapters are built around four ways the Spasmodics participated in nineteenth-century discussions of poetry. Throughout these chapters, I attempt to unpack the word "spasmodic" and determine what nineteenth-century literary critics meant when they labeled a poem "Spasmodic." There was no established definition for the word. The first use I have found of it as a literary adjective describing the poets who would come to be known by—and drowned in—that name is in an 1853 essay by Kingsley, "Thoughts on Shelley and Byron," that deplores the vogue for "spasmodic, vague, extravagant and effeminate" poetry (574). Here, the negative connotations of "spasmodic" are established by its proximity to a series of morally subversive terms. Its future literary usage is similarly approximate. It is generally understood to imply effeminacy and ill-health, but the relationship between these attributes and literary style is unexplored. During the middle decades of the century,

critics such as Charles Kingsley, Coventry Patmore, William Edmondstoune Aytoun, Margaret Oliphant, David Masson, George Gilfillan and Matthew Arnold variously defined Spasmodic poetry as prurient, dull, beautiful, excessive, sensual, illogical, plotless, needlessly full of images, fragmented, and truthful. The adjective "spasmodic," because it was so ill-defined and so evocative, became ample enough to be applied to the poems written by everyone from Dobell and Smith to Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning, and even Emily Dickinson.

The larger task of this project is to press on the use of "spasmodic" as a term of literary derision to expose ways—albeit indirect—to bring into relevance cultural and social developments beyond the sphere of literature and poetics. Many scholars see the Spasmodic poets as "spasmodic" to the extent that they were "bad writers." Thus, Antony Harrison explains in Chapter Two of *Victorian Poets and Romantic Poems* that though Tennyson's *Maud* was attacked as "Spasmodic" by critics such as Aytoun and Oliphant, the Laureate was actually attempting to repudiate and mock Spasmodic verse. Other more recent critics seek to establish a modern agenda in Spasmodic poems. For example, Martha Westwater argues in *The Spasmodic Career of Sydney Dobell* (1992) that Dobell was, despite his bad name, a feminist and an early postmodernist. My project is neither to recuperate the reputation of the Spasmodics through an appeal to their latent compatibility with twentieth-century ideologies, as Westwater tries to do, nor to attempt "to immunize Tennyson from the Spasmodic contagion," as Harrison puts it (71). This project, instead, takes as its topic an exploration of nineteenth-century cultural discourses surrounding the phrase "spasmodic," discourses intimately related to emergent theories of the nervous system

as well as literary reactions to modernity. The Spasmodics were both threatening and fascinating to the Victorians to the extent that these biological innovations and this shifting experience of the world were threatening as well as fascinating.

Chapter One, The Spasmodic Threat: Contemporary Critical Responses to Spasmodicism, sets the critical context for understanding the history of the Spasmodic poets. It explores reactions to the Spasmodics from notable nineteenth-century literary critics Aytoun, Arnold, Masson, Oliphant, Gilfillan, Kingsley, Patmore, and William H. Smith. With a few exceptions, these critics label the Spasmodics at once absurdly foolish and threatening to moral order. Formally speaking, nineteenth-century critics understood Spasmodic compositions as a series of gorgeous images unconnected by deeper thematic unity. Overt attention in these poems to metaphor and dazzling word choice suggested to critics that Spasmodic poets were interested in language rather than meaning, form rather than content. This explains why the Spasmodics were felt to undermine sane literary practices: neglecting content, they were invested in language and its effects on the reader, and this was seen to be morally suspect.

I end this chapter with Aytoun's clever parody, *Firmilian; a Spasmodic Tragedy*, which established the Spasmodics as prurient and absurd. The action of the poem involves a Spasmodic poet, modeled on Dobell and Smith's poet-heroes, who is promiscuous, murderous, and criminally insane. In writing *Firmilian*, Aytoun gave the Spasmodics what they were missing: a plot, but one that was deeply invested in pathology and criminality. *Firmilian* set the disapproving terms of most future critiques, but it also established the primary literary reaction to the Spasmodics:

laughter. The Spasmodics emerge as morally and poetically corrupt, absurd and immature pseudo-poets who were more interested in word play than human realities. At the same time, laughter itself is a series of spasms that suggest a pleasure in Spasmodic abandon.

Chapter Two, The Spasmodic Disease: Sydney Dobell's *Balder* and the Poetics of the Spasming Body, elaborates another crucial context for understanding the threat posed by Spasmodic verse: spasmodic medical conditions. Reading criticism of Spasmodic poetry alongside medical writing about spasmodic disorders, I explore the ways investigations into the nervous system undermined a hierarchical notion of a body regulated by the mind. The nervous system was understood to bypass the will and consciousness in just the ways that Spasmodic poetry was understood to bypass substantive thematics. That is, Spasmodic poems failed to articulate a cohesive vision of the universe at the moment when the body was understood to be less "readable" and more fragmented than ever before. In the nineteenth century, doctors began to identify and classify Spasmodic medical disorders in which the body ruptured the field of mental control. The medical usages of "spasmodic" to describe these conditions, in conjunction with literary labeling, results in a fusion whereby unstable Spasmodic metrics encode medically spasmodic gestures of the body. Reading Dobell's *Balder* alongside James Mill's medico-philosophical *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* (1829), as well as medical texts including Marshall Hall's *Memoirs of the Nervous System* (1837) and *On the Diseases and Derangements of the Nervous System* (1841), and Henry Maudsley's *Physiology and Pathology of the Mind* (1867), I argue that the biological

context is crucial for understanding the ways Spasmodic verse was held to be enervating and pathological.

The next chapter, Spasmodic Masculinity and the Poetics of the Body Weak, turns to Victorian conceptions of masculinity as another cultural and literary framework for understanding the Spasmodics. The Victorian gentleman, as Pip aspires to the title, was never spasmodic. Instead, masculinity demanded moral and mental balance, a firm grasp of events and a physical and mental musculature capable of carrying out projects of state, none of which the Spasmodics ever achieved. Spasmodic poets and characters, in fact, were explicitly effeminate to their critics. I read Alexander Smith's *Life-Drama* alongside Kingsley's novel of masculine virtue, *Two Years Ago*, in order to demonstrate how Spasmodic models of masculinity differed from conventional ones by emphasizing sensuous yearning, exquisitely felt physical weakness and social isolation. Since mid-Victorian understandings of gender inflected twentieth-century understandings of masculinity and femininity, the Spasmodics were derided until the latter part of this century when their particular articulation of masculinity coincides with late twentieth-century questioning of rigid gender binaries.

The Spasmodic man, not exactly feminine and not exactly masculine, is a third gender, a failed version of high Victorian masculinity that rejects projects of state for projects of the imagination. The Spasmodics are thus a significant locus for mid-Victorian debates over the usefulness of poetry for a nation invested in colonial projects, as is Tennyson's *Maud*, which was accused of succumbing to Spasmodic influence in its impassioned exploration of interiority and madness against the

background of the Crimean War. In this chapter, I turn to the critical reaction to *Maud* to emphasize not only the similarities between Spasmodic verse and "canonical" nineteenth-century poetry, but also the pervasiveness of nineteenth-century anxiety over the extent to which poets like Tennyson and the Spasmodics, who dealt in feelings and words, could adapt themselves to masculinist traits of self-control, objectivity, and war-time activity.

Chapter Four, Spasms and Sensations: Sensation Fiction and Spasmodic Responses to Modernity, takes up the ways Spasmodic poetry—like the equally denigrated sensation novel—can be understood as a response to the unnerving effects of modernity such as urbanization, communication technologies, the temporal and physical jostling of the railroad. In delivering to the reader a series of sensational jolts through their exaggerated metaphors, and in their metrical and thematic emphasis on fragmentation, Spasmodic poems can be read as reactions to the modern world. In 1939, Lionel Trilling wrote that "[t]he Spasmodics saw something of the complexity of modern life, but saw it without a coherent idea and responded to multitudinousness with the multitudinousness of a literary method which paid more attention to parts than to their integration" (*Matthew Arnold* 136).[2] Rather than accepting the lack of a "coherent idea" as a failure, I understand it as a method for interpreting the experience of complexity. This Spasmodic mode of interpreting modernity, I argue, articulates links between modernity, the body, and literature. Both Spasmodic poems and sensation novels address themselves to the nervous system of the increasingly modernized reader; here I read J. Westland Marston's *Gerald* side by side with

[2] See Lori-Ann Paige's unpublished 1994 dissertation "The Unstable Bubble of Inflated Thought" for further analysis of Trilling's position.

Wilkie Collins' sensational *The Lady and the Law* for what they have to reveal about the psychosomatic effects of modern fragmentation on genre, gender, and literary composition.

Finally, my concluding chapter, The Spasmodic Fall, follows the metaphor of falling through this project. Imputed instability of versification, method and quality renders the Spasmodics physically spasmodic. Stories of Dobell's tendency to trip, for example, find their way into literary reviews well into the twentieth century. Frozen in the act of toppling over, Spasmodic poets and their Spasmodic compositions are nonetheless more than simply ridiculous. Through an interpretation of E.S. Dallas's *The Gay Science*, I explore the convergence of Spasmodic poetry with pleasure, absurdity and shame. *The Gay Science* argues that the unconscious produces our pleasure in verse. "Falling," then, as a momentary lapse of self-control and balance, is a way of rendering the pleasure in Spasmodic poetry. Thus I hope to restore some of the pleasure the early readers of Spasmodic poetry experienced before critics labeled and thereby marginalized it. In the final chapter, I explore the ways pleasure in fragmentation, unbalancing, "falling," is a specifically s/Spasmodic joy.

Chapter One
The Spasmodic Threat: Contemporary Critical Responses to Spasmodic Poetics

> But, apart from their exaggerated notion of their calling, let us see what is the practice of the poets of the Spasmodic School. In the first place, they rarely, if ever, attempt anything like a plot. After you finish the perusal of their verses, you find yourself just as wise as when you began. . . . In the second place, we regret to say they are often exceedingly profane, not, we suppose intentionally, but because they have not sense enough to see the limits which decency as well as duty prescribes. In the third place, they are occasionally very prurient. And in the fourth place they are almost always unintelligible.
>
> --William Edmondstoune Aytoun, "Review of *Firmilian*"

> Ah! ah! ah!
> Ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah!
> By Satan! This is well. What! am I judged?
>
> --Sydney Dobell, *Balder*

Most modern writing on the Spasmodics, including this, begins with the fact that the Spasmodics were both fantastically popular and spectacularly mocked. The impressive amount of critical debate inspired by the Spasmodics is, in fact, more readily accessible to a researcher than their poems themselves, long out of print. There is a certain morbid appeal in the harsh sentences handed down upon the Spasmodics from the mid-nineteenth century even into the mid-twentieth century, especially when we consider their initial popularity and the high praise they received from some critics. But beyond the temptation of the sordid, and beyond the fact that displeased critics can be very clever and very funny, there remains a large amount of unexamined anger, frustrated fondness and exasperation with the Spasmodics.

In this chapter, I will ask why the Spasmodics, as represented by P.J. Bailey, Sydney Dobell, and Alexander Smith, posed such problems for critics.[1] Along the way I will try to suggest some reasons the Spasmodics might have found themselves alternately so popular and so reviled, and ultimately so forgotten; but, most importantly, I will argue that the Spasmodics posed a threat to Victorian ideas of order and structure in ways that seemed to put not only poetry but society itself in danger. When we examine reviews and other responses to Bailey's *Festus* (1839 first edition, 1845 second edition, 1850 third edition), Smith's *A Life-Drama* (1852), and Dobell's *Balder* (1854), the same traits, sometimes represented as sins and other times as strengths, are repeatedly and almost incessantly imputed to the Spasmodics: a lack of cohesion on the levels of both form and content, turbulent or violent emotional excess, and a perceived moral rot.

After very briefly tracking the literary antecedents of Spasmodic poetry, I will begin this chapter by turning to contemporary responses to the Spasmodics' hyperbolic metaphors and analogies. Through their use of ornate metaphorical language the Spasmodics represented fears of literary and social incoherence. Their neglect of plot highlighted the fragmented nature of their poetics, metaphor following metaphor, image upon image. The next section of this chapter will address the excess

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[1] Although Jerome Buckley, in a chapter on the "Spasmodic School" in *The Victorian Temper*, mentions more than ten poets who were "worthy" of the title "Spasmodic," Bailey, Dobell and Smith were the ones who received the most critical attention and most popular readership in their time. Since they provide the firmest base for the examination of Spasmodicism, I will begin with them. In Chapter Four, I introduce another Spasmodic poet, J. Westland Marston, whose work exemplifies some of the dominant strains of Spasmodic poetry. Because *Festus* was published in 1839, it doesn't figure as strongly into my dissertation as *A Life-Drama* and *Balder*, which were produced in the cultural climate of the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the period in which I am most interested here. Nevertheless, the reviews of *Festus* discussed in this chapter are essential to understanding what "Spasmodic poetry" meant for the Victorians.

emotional and linguistic energy produced by Spasmodic poems, connecting it to fears of incoherence, as well as some critics' hopes for poetic regeneration. The third section will detail ways many nineteenth-century critics were involved in a poetic discourse of exclusion and curtailment, clamping down on fragmented, unpredictable Spasmodic verse through critical arguments in journals as well as by casting the Spasmodics as ambitious social-climbers. I will conclude this chapter with an examination of William Edmondstoune Aytoun's *Firmilian*-- a parody of *A Life-Drama*, *Balder*, and *Festus*. Arguably the single most influential and damning contemporary response to these poems, it also locates them beyond the taming influences of monogamy and Empire.

Contemporary criticism emphasized the similarities between the Spasmodics and their literary parents, Byron, Shelley and Keats. Although some critics (such as their greatest champion George Gilfillan) congratulated Smith on his Keatsian richness of imagery, the dominant strain in the literary reception of the Spasmodics criticized their use of the alleged "worst" elements of Romanticism—egotism, social isolation, the diseased effeminacy of dissipation. In the essay that coined the term "spasmodic" in relation to the Spasmodic poets, Charles Kingsley describes this emergent school as a literary bastardization of Shelley and Byron. For Kingsley, the Spasmodics miss the complex ways in which Byron and Shelley interrogated social laws and perceived realities, and instead pick up on their sentimentality and bombast.

Spasmodic poetry, emphasizing as it does the plight of the isolated artist struggling with his impassioned nature, strongly echoes Romanticism's interest in the

poet as such. Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* initiates many of the traits that would later mark Spasmodic verse. These famous lines from Canto III could easily describe the feelings of *Balder* or *A Life-Drama*'s poet-heroes:

> Could I embody and unbosom now
> That which is most within me,—could I wreak
> My thought upon expression, and thus throw
> Soul, heart, mind, passions, feelings, strong or weak,
> All that I would have sought, and all I seek,
> Bear, know, feel, and yet breathe—into *one* word,
> And that one word were Lightening, I would speak;
> But as it is, I live and die unheard,
> With a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a sword. (III, 289-297)

Childe Harold's metaphor of words as a violent natural phenomenon, an all-encompassing linguistic event that would suddenly illuminate and transform the landscape, becomes a standard Spasmodic trope, complicated for all of these poets by a recognition of the limits of language to perform physically (see Chapter Two). Like Childe Harold in the passage above, Spasmodic poet-heroes are invested in the relationship between physicality and language. For the Spasmodics, this relationship signifies not only an impossible Byronic desire to rip open the heavens with a word, but also an abiding interest in the effect of words upon the body of the poet. In his comparison of language to a bolt of lightening, Byron imagines great agency for the poet, yet because he cannot make words perform this way, he falls quiet (or at least promises to) and sheathes his great thoughts like a sword. The Spasmodics, following

Byron, believed above all in the poet as a seer and tragically thwarted redeemer of their age, but they were never perceived to have Byron's purposefulness. The Spasmodics imagine the poet as a tortured being out of whose body words erupt—more volcano than lightening-flash. They create a vision of the poet at the mercy of his language; like spasms, it comes upon him unaware and overflows him with its torrents. Byron used the image of the sheathed sword to suggest a silence that is half-chosen and half imposed by the limitations of language to perform, but he also fails to fall silent. The image has its power because it suggests power: the dangerous sword, concealed for now. The Spasmodics, on the other hand, were perceived as too fragile for weaponry (see Chapter Three and the discussion of the ways Spasmodic poetry was seen as a threat to war-time valor). Their sword was rather the scalpel, turned upon the self. Contemporary critics scorned Spasmodic poems as elaborate dissections of the poet's own solipsistic yearnings and private heart-breaks.

Clearly, the literary relationship between Byron and the Spasmodics is fraught. Like Manfred, Spasmodic poet-heroes are filled with a nameless, uneasy restlessness, associated with social and sexual sin. For Manfred, as for the Spasmodics a few decades later, this restlessness was fed by a constant mental probing of the self. Manfred complains, "My slumbers—if I slumber—are not sleep, / But a continuance of enduring thought, / Which then I can resist not: in my heart / There is a vigil, and these eyes but close / To look within" (Act I, scene i, 3-7). The Spasmodics echo Manfred's interior turn, much to the dismay of critics such as Matthew Arnold, who famously deplored the dialogue of the mind with itself.

Byron's solipsistic desires and disappointments were no less a part of his poetry than those of the Spasmodics, yet they were reviled where he was celebrated. While many Victorians were prepared to see Byron as a "manly" and original writer (see Chapter Three), they found the Spasmodics dangerously effeminate, perhaps because the Spasmodics, both in their emphasis on the poet at the mercy of his own enraged passions and in the absurdity of their name, seemed more likely to be hit by lightening than to create it. Kingsley, Aytoun, Margaret Oliphant, and many other critics felt that the literature of their own age was a pale imitation of what had come before, and criticized the Spasmodics as representative of a blighted, derivative generation. Moreover, they questioned the usefulness of Byronic celebration of the poet-as-personality against the background of urbanization, war in the Crimea, and increasingly vast imperial efforts overseas.

The Spasmodics were uncomfortably situated at the crossroads of what we now think of as Romantic and Victorian verse. Of course, many nineteenth-century poets, from Tennyson to Browning to Arnold, were both strongly influenced by the previous generation of poets and eager to differentiate their own work. Robert Browning's early work in the 1830s, for example, is clearly indebted to the influence of Keats and Shelley, although Browning's later poetry repudiates these sympathies. Browning's early poems, particularly *Pauline; A Fragment of a Confession* (1833), *Paracelsus* (1835) and *Sordello* (1840), all follow the Romantic trajectory of a poetic soul negotiating with great passions, unnamed guilt, and poetic inspiration in a hostile society. These three poems, like the major Spasmodic poems, are stories of poets who struggle to write, poets who are indebted to a Romantic aesthetic of the isolated artist.

In *The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry: Sources of the Poetic Imagination in Tennyson, Browning and Arnold*, Edward Dudely Johnson writes that *Pauline*, *Paracelsus*, and *Sordello* "are variations on a single theme: the evolution of the creative impulse in artists beset by uncertainty as to the genius of their inspiration and the best uses that can be made of their talents" (72).

Working between the inherited Romantic emphasis on the troubled, unique personality of the poet and the increasing pressures on the poet to participate in the masculine public sphere as a more objective, influential and inspirational voice, capable of motivational calls-to-arms and celebrations of national vigor, nineteenth-century poets found themselves caught between poetic models. For Bernard Richards in *English Poetry of the Victorian Period 1830-1890*, the attempt to configure the role of the poet and of poetry against a shifting social background was one of the defining characteristics of Victorian poetry. The Spasmodics, like Browning, were engaged in this characteristic Victorian struggle; in fact, Browning was often labeled Spasmodic by his critics (see, for example, David DeLaura's 1974 essay "Browning the Spasmodic"). In *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, Richard Cronin more strongly argues that "Browning has good claims to have instigated Spasmodic poetry" with the intense subjectivity of *Pauline*, *Paracelsus*, and *Sordello* (292). Although literary history tends to neglect Browning's early poems, and although the Spasmodics seem more like absurd aberrations than anything else, the efforts made in these poems to define the role of the poet were at the heart of the

ways Victorians understood the relationships between the verse produced at the turn of the previous century and the verse produced in the middle of the new one.

Historically situating the Spasmodics is useful in terms of understanding the Victorian relationship to Romanticism, but in doing so I also hope to make clear that their poems are not neglected today because they "aren't any good," but because they posed serious threats to Victorian categories of order with their turbulent energy and fragmented verse, resulting in their being left out of the canon of nineteenth-century poetry as it is generally understood today. Further, I want to draw attention to the fact that most contemporary reviewers focused on the architecture of Spasmodic poems, criticizing structural flaws and the lack of conceptual frameworks with more vehemence and greater attention than they addressed to the events in the poem. This is surprising because Spasmodic poems, although they may not depend on narrative for their force, are filled with morally ambiguous sexual encounters, murders and insanities. In the reviews of Spasmodic poems, structural sins come to stand for moral ones. That is, although some arguments were advanced against what Aytoun called the "prurience" of Spasmodic poems, many contemporary reviewers condemned this immorality in the context of a perceived lack of stylistic competence ("Review of *Firmilian*" 534). Because the fragmented, incoherent nature of Spasmodic poetics reflected concerns about moral, social, sexual, racial and class fragmentation and incoherence, the Victorians needed to exorcize the Spasmodic taint from poetry, however much some of the critics I will discuss along the way valued Spasmodic creative fervor.

"Spasmodic," a term that is equal parts an insult and a category, defies easy definition. It is generally accepted that nineteenth-century critics meant by it a failure to produce coherent verse with an even emotional and linguistic pitch. Even today it conveys a negativity absent from the names of most other nineteenth-century movements, such as "Pre-Raphaelite." Before being applied to a school of poetry, moreover, "spasmodic" appeared in medical tracts as early as 1681 to mean a convulsion or cramp, usually signifying physical disorder. Used to describe poetry, "spasmodic" therefore suggests medical pathology as well as compositional irregularity, implying that the Spasmodics were diseased to the same degree that they were faulty writers. This dissertation will try to define exactly what that term entailed, in all of its moral and material weight, to the Victorians.

The 1850s were the formative years of the Spasmodics, but theirs was a stunted formation that ended just as it began. I attempt in this chapter to characterize that poetic movement, intervening in the hazy moment when they were first grouped together. To do this I must look backwards through a fog of nomenclature. It is impossible to consider Smith, Dobell and Bailey's roles as Victorian poets without this term. On the other hand, it is their poetry that defined the term. These poets were both the inspired source and the ridiculous object of the poetic term "Spasmodic," creators of the same energies that were harnessed against them. This double-bind of identity is a space where Victorian ideas about poetics fold in, engendering and destroying aspects of their own energies.

Although "spasmodic" was employed as a literary insult fairly regularly by the 1850s and 60s, there was never a clear consensus over its meaning. The one

contemporary attempt to "see what is the practice of the poets of the Spasmodic School" comes from Aytoun's playful review of his own Spasmodic parody *Firmilian* (534). Aytoun defines literary Spasmodicism as plotlessness, prurience, egotism and bombast. "Spasmodic," however, soon expanded to have a host of other literary meanings that evoked anything from effaced masculinity to failed will power to sickness to metrical experimentation.

"Spasmodic" traveled across the ocean to appear in American literary history as well. Thomas Wentworth Higginson apparently used the term to criticize Emily Dickinson. On June 7, 1862, she writes to him: "You think my gait "spasmodic." I am in danger, Sir. / You think me "uncontrolled." I have no Tribunal . . . / The Sailor cannot see the North, but knows the Needle can." (Letters of Emily Dickinson 408-409).

As Jonathan Morse points out in "Emily Dickinson and the Spasmodic School: A Note on Thomas Wentworth Higginson's Esthetics," (1977) Higginson's judgment has been turned back upon him, and his opinion of Dickinson's Spasmodicism has made him seem an embarrassingly unoriginal critic, a "tragically convention-bound reader," while vindicating her as a misunderstood creative genius (505). Higginson's failure to realize Dickinson's potential is indicated by what Morse sees as his mistake in applying a "bad" term to "good" poetry. Whatever Higginson may have meant by "spasmodic," the word itself is enough to raise the uncomfortable specter of failed poetry. Higginson is tainted simply by having used it.

The reviews from which I draw the materials of this chapter were written when the term was first beginning to be applied, just before and just after the term

"Spasmodic" rose in popular usage as a lamentable category of poetics. Thus the goals of the reviews are varied: sometimes they are directed at general trends in poetry, sometimes at the three parent Spasmodics, sometimes at one of them (most often Alexander Smith and his *A Life-Drama*, which garnered the most vehemently negative and positive reviews—possibly because it did not come out too close to Aytoun's parody, as *Balder* did, and because it was seen as fresher than *Festus*, which had been lingering since 1839). But all point to traits that would become known as stereotypically Spasmodic.

In *The Victorian Temper*, Jerome Buckley notes that "Though long since forgotten, the Spasmodic poets once assumed, even to more sober artists, considerable proportions; they once cast so long a shadow across the whole verse of their time that their frenetic volumes cannot even now be quite ignored in any estimate of early Victorian taste" (42). Implied in Buckley's use of "shadow" to describe the influence of these poets, as well as his exclusion of their authors from the category "sober," is the suggestion that he saw in them a drunken irresponsibility, a nasty "frenetic" side of Victorian verse that it would be well if we could "quite ignore." We have nearly done so, but, to the Victorians, the three main Spasmodic texts—P.J. Bailey's *Festus*, Sydney Dobell's *Balder*, and Alexander Smith's *A Life-Drama*—were all worthy of initial praise before these authors were lumped together as "Spasmodics." For example, Tennyson is recorded as saying *Festus* was "grander than anything he [Tennyson] himself had written" (quoted in Birley 174). Influential nineteenth-century critic George Gilfillan marveled that Sydney Dobell wrote poems "as exquisitely beautiful as anything in Spenser, Wordsworth, or Shelley" while

Alexander Smith was "a new messenger and mediator between the Infinite and the race of man" (*Gallery of Literary Portraits* 50, 61).[2] Arthur Hugh Clough was a champion of Alexander Smith as well, while Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Charlotte Brontë both valued Dobell's work. All three authors were widely read in England and America, going through numerous editions. By the nineteen-fifties, however, Buckley was repeating a well-established critical consensus when he dismissed the Spasmodics as "minor poets failing in a major key" (*The Victorian Temper* 43).

Perhaps it was the actual naming of the various poets' work, the grouping them together under one name, that caused them to disappear from our conception of nineteenth-century poetry. The first part of the 1850s, during which *Balder* and *A Life- Drama* were published and *Festus* went into a revised and expanded third edition, marked a turning point in the linked fates of Bailey, Dobell and Smith. Although each had been praised individually, in this period the term "Spasmodic" began to be applied to the three of them and they emerged as what Aytoun labeled "the Spasmodic School"—no longer individual poets who could stand or fall on their own recognized merits or acknowledged faults, but instead a coterie with a bad name, whose association with each other under the rubric "Spasmodic" insured that none would survive.

Charles Kingsley coined the term "Spasmodic" in a November 1853 review that deplored the rising school of poetry as "spasmodic, vague, extravagant and effeminate" ("Thoughts on Byron and Shelley" 574). He did not mention anyone by

[2] Reverend George Gilfillan (1837-1878) was a Scottish United Presbyterian minister, public lecturer, and author of over one hundred books, including poetry, autobiography, fiction, and literary criticism. He always championed the Spasmodics.

name, but he dwelt on the characteristics—Keatsian opulence, Byronic individuality, striking metaphors, confusion of plot, and intensity of language—that would later be used by critics such as Aytoun, Coventry Patmore, Margaret Oliphant and, much later, Buckley to define the work of Smith, Dobell and Bailey. In May of 1854, Aytoun popularized (and is often given credit for) the term when he published a mock-review of his own Spasmodic parody *Firmilian: A Spasmodic Tragedy*, noting "those who admire spasmodic throes and writhings may possibly be inclined to exalt [the author] to a very high pinnacle of fame: for certainly, in no modern work of poetry . . . have we found so many symptoms of unmistakable lunacy" (533). He went on to describe the "practice of the poets of the Spasmodic school" who are "exaggerated," "profane" and "almost always unintelligible" (534). Aytoun's parody was published the same year as *Balder*, while *A Life-Drama* had been published just the year before. Aytoun had already reviewed both poets unfavorably, and *Firmilian* clearly parallels both of them, as well as *Festus*. From this point on, critical opinion generally went against the poets, arguably because it is easier to find reasons to praise an individual poet than it is to champion a school of poets with a name of ill-repute. Linked to pathologized physical disorders and suggestive of faltering self-control, the name was so devastating that after Aytoun's parody Dobell never published the planned second and third parts of *Balder*. It is reported that Aytoun felt so bad for his part in ruining Alexander Smith's career that he helped him find work at *Blackwood's* (see Weinstein 162).

With the exception of Richard Cronin's 2002 essay "The Spasmodics" in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, which has a broad introductory purpose, modern

criticism on Smith, Dobell or Bailey usually focuses on one of the three in an attempt to disentangle him from the tentacles of the other two and their composite name. Martha Westwater's 1992 *Spasmodic Career of Sydney Dobell* and Malcolm Pittock's 1992 "Dobell, *Balder*, and Post-Romanticism" seek to claim Dobell as an accomplished feminist poet, while Robert Birley's 1962 *Sunk Without Trace* tries to exhume *Festus* from the common grave. Oddly, few attempts have been made to redeem Smith, whose *A Life-Drama* was the focal point of more critical discussion than the other two, perhaps because it was the first work of a previously obscure and poor young man. Mark Weinstein's 1968 *William Edmondstoune Aytoun and the Spasmodic Controversy*, the only published book to take the nineteenth-century discussion about Spasmodic poetry as part of its main focus, tells history from the perspective of their biggest critic.

"Barbaric Jewelry": the Striking Images and Poetic Fragments

The strongest and most consistent criticism nineteenth-century reviewers made of the Spasmodics had to do with the poets' exuberant use of the language. Almost every review of these poems, from the scathing to the amused to the adulatory, made note of the Spasmodic penchant for exotic and astounding words, metaphors and images. These two passages are representative of many reviews in their articulation of the Spasmodics' failure to use language appropriately:

> In the opinion of these writers [Bailey, Smith and Dobell], a poet is nothing if not *striking*. Accordingly every line they put forth is, or at least is intended to be, a fine thing, though some

of the dramas of this school are twenty thousand lines long. The consequence is, that the 'poems' of these writers are, to what we and the world hitherto have regarded as true poems, pretty much what 'Christmas trees' are to forest trees. Sugar-plums, quick-silvered globes, oranges, gimcracks, and lighted candles are not more incongruous ornaments to the stunted fir tree which they decorate for the nonce at a Christmas party than the tinsel thoughts and images which illustrate the subjects chosen by these poets. (Coventry Patmore, *Edinburgh Review* 1856, "New Poets" 341)

Of Mr. Alexander Smith we have not a great deal to say. He belongs to the fireworks school. He falls upon us in glittering showers, red, blue and white stars, which vanish into airy nothing, and are succeeded by others; now he delights our eyes with the rapid whizz of a Catherine wheel, and then explodes with a burst of crackers. He fires blank cartridges and has a fire glow like Bengal lights. His business is neither with thought nor feeling, but with imagery *pur et simple*. His object is to be amazing, not consecutive. He is exactly like a kaleidoscope, every two or three lines he turns himself around and *presto*! All the bits of glass run into new shapes and contrasts of colour, beautiful and glittering, but without much connection with

> what has gone before. (W.C. Roscoe, *The Prospective Review* 1854, 116-7)[3]

Linguistic "glitter" posed a problem for those critics who believed poetry existed to communicate greater truths. Despite the popularity of Tennyson's emotionally and lyrically intense *Maud* and, later, Swinburne's remarkable poetics of sensuality, Matthew Arnold was speaking for a large group of nineteenth-century critics when he wrote in the "Preface" to his 1853 volume of poems that poetry should "appeal to the great primary human affections: to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the human race" (1272). That is, poetry should communicate directly with our most noble feelings, rather than astounding the reader with gorgeous language. Earlier, in the same year *Festus* was published (1839), William H. Smith had argued in "A Prosing on Poetry" (*Blackwood's*) that poetry ought to "cling in preference to that vernacular dialect which carries with it more pathos, as it is more closely aligned to the wants and passions of men" (195).[4] Arnold spoke highly of the Greeks, whose "expression is so elegant" because "it is so simple and so well subordinated" to the overarching action that defined their literature ("Preface" 1273). The Spasmodics were the opposite of this: they produced language as far from simple as possible, language that in its very obtrusiveness suggests a poetics that takes place entirely on the surface, imagery *pur et simple*.

Beyond being elaborate, Spasmodic language was also thought to occlude any sense of cohesive theme or narrative movement. Striking language, reviewers

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[3] William Caldwell Roscoe (1823-1859), a London barrister who wrote several dramas and poems, was a frequent contributor to the *National Review* and the *Prospective Review*.

[4] William H. Smith (1808-1872), whose reviews of the Spasmodics I will engage in greater detail later in this chapter, was a Glasgow-educated author and frequent contributor to *Blackwood's* from 1839-1869.

argued, stalled the poems at the level of the individual image, leaving it with little forward momentum. Patmore, in the essay with which I opened this section, found that he could do nothing better than quote Arnold's "Preface" against the Spasmodics: "We have poems which seem to exist merely for the sake of single lines and passages, not for the sake of producing any total impression. We have critics who seem to direct their attention merely to detached expressions, to the language about the action, not to the action itself" (Arnold, quoted in Patmore 342). Roscoe, whose review of Smith I quoted at the beginning of this section, made a similar criticism : "[Smith] not only has nothing to say, he does not wish to say anything. He appears seriously to believe that poetry is the art of collecting and arranging descriptions and similes" (116-7). Even Clough, who compared Arnold unfavorably with Smith in a review of the two, noted that "simile within simile, after the manner of Chinese boxes, are more curious than beautiful; nor is it the true aim of the poet, as of the Italian boy in the street, to poise upon his head, for public exhibition, a board crowded as thick as they can stand with images . . . " (374-5). But, as usual, it was left to Aytoun to say it most strongly. In his mock review of *Firmilian*, he wrote: " . . . [Spasmodic poets] really mean nothing. They are simply writing nonsense-verses; but they contrive, by blazing away whole rounds of metaphor, to mask their absolute poverty of thought, and to convey the impression that there must be something stupendous under so heavy a canopy of smoke" (551) In the same review, Aytoun argued that the poets of the "Spasmodic School" "[R]arely, if ever, attempt anything like a plot. . . You cannot tell what they would be at. You have a confused recollection of stars, and sunbeams, and moon beams, as if you had been staring at an orrery; but sun, moon and stars,

were intended to give light to something—and what that something is, in the poet's page, you cannot, for the life of you discover" (534).

The problem of language's separation from meaning extended beyond the Spasmodics themselves; it was at the very root of Victorian conceptions of the uses of poetry. Patmore adds that undue attention to expression as such "is sometimes the case even with Mr. Tennyson and Mr. Browning" ("New Poets" 345). For Oliphant, Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, although it satisfies Arnold's criterion by "appeal[ing] to one of the primitive and universal emotions of human nature," fails to live up to the name of poetry because it "does not *flow*" (Oliphant 130, 129). It is "a rosary of golden beads, some of them gemmed and radiant, fit to be set in a king's crown," but "the sequence of these fancies knows no logic" (129, 130). Ultimately, even the laureate is not immune from a certain Spasmodic accumulation of metaphors and images.

Criticism of the Spasmodics' language was so powerful and oft-repeated that it outlasted the Victorian age. Volume XIII of the *Cambridge History of English and American Literature* (published between 1907 and 1921) tells us that Spasmodic poems are noted for their "passages of extraordinary brilliance" but that these passages "rarely have, as the common phrase goes, 'much to do with anything' and are usually 'purple patches' in the strictest sense—purple enough, but, also, patchy enough." The essay describes these passages as "barbaric jewelry," drawing attention to the fact that, as in Patmore's metaphor of the Christmas tree or Oliphant's of jeweled beads, they were thought of as mere surface decorations: gemstones or tinsel that became meaningless, sparkling language when disconnected with anything

deeper. For critics of the Spasmodics, the intensity of the language signaled a paucity of thought or even attention underneath, even though the Spasmodics themselves, like Tennyson in *In Memoriam*, seemed to be experimenting with a style of representing emotion that highlighted isolated moments of intense experience over an integrated emotional experience of the world.

Despite accusations of self-indulgent writing, the Spasmodics' insistence on the brilliant image as the defining feature of poetry suggests a particular style. In the course of *A Life-Drama*, Smith indicates the pleasure to be found in the creation of language: "But our chief joy/ Was to draw images from everything;/ And images lay thick upon our talk,/ As shells on ocean-sands" (121). Somewhat more scientific are Dobell's theories on poetry and metaphor, put forth in his 1857 lecture "The Nature of Poetry." Although the Spasmodics never met as a cabal or published a manifesto, Dobell's lecture articulates a well-reasoned theory of poetics and metaphor that can be read as an explanation of Spasmodic style. Dobell's theory is based on a fecund poetics of relationship. For him, ideas and feelings are organized like a cosmos, each revolving around the other: "The Truth on which the inner eye is chiefly fixed becomes a solar centre and other truths are rapidly apprehended by rapid excursions from this central point—to which they become, therefore, accessories; each accessory (in proportion to the attention paid to it) itself the centre of still subordinate excursions" (*Thoughts on Art, Philosophy and Religion* 18). It is not the adherence of these truths to a central idea, but the multifaceted relationships between them that Dobell finds indicative of true poetry: " . . . the inner eye [of the poet] has to do with that inner universe of facts which memory has stored and perception

supplies, and with such new combinations of these as may take place . . ." (*Thoughts* 17). For him, the ideal poet would have a mind concerned with "the position of things regarding each other" and capable of "spontaneously co-ordinating" phenomena (*Thoughts* 11, 9). It is not so strange, then, that Spasmodic poems, especially Dobell's, seem to move by metaphor, linking images rather than actions and valuing a descriptive turn of phrase over cohesive thematic development.

The Spasmodics' critics, if they took note of Dobell's theories, held no stock in them. Their foremost concern remained that by laboring over individual metaphors and analogies, poets neglect what should be underneath them: a plot or theme that would redeem and grant significance to all the words, however glittery. As Arnold put it, "What are the eternal objects of Poetry, among all nations and at all times? They are actions; human actions . . ." (1271). Action, or "anything like a plot," is the "something stupendous" Aytoun wanted to find underneath all that smoke and lurking in all those moonbeams. It is also the one thing Spasmodic poems almost never have. *Festus*, *Balder*, and *A Life-Drama* are all dramatic poems that seem to promise some kind of narrative development. Each takes the individual growth of a man as its topic, yet none allows a story to unfold so much as it allows the character considerable expressive license.

One of the more interesting things about the critics' insistence on the necessity of unifying action is that it ignores the fact that none of these poems takes narrative as its defining feature. The poems are dramatic, and hence focus instead on their characters' states of minds and feelings. In his lecture, Dobell specifies that poetry is always and only the product of an individual mind, functioning as a metaphor for that

mind only. This fundamental subjectivity is intensified when the poetry at stake is dramatic, allowing the poet access to a world of "infinite possible variety" and "an inexhaustible stock of men and women" in his characters (*Thoughts* 29). Spasmodic poems exploit these infinities and inexhaustibilities, to the point, for many of their critics, of infinite exhaustion. Although *Festus* includes such unusual acts as trips into outer space and the actual end of the world, complete with the salvation of mankind, most of the poem consists of elaborate philosophical debates between Festus and Satan. *Balder* alternates monologues of the hero with lyrics from his wife: they only leave their rooms once for a short walk. Balder debates with himself for hundreds of tortured lines over whether he should kill his wife, but the end of the poem forecloses even this event. The last scene in the book reveals him standing over her with a knife, and we are left forever in that moment of uncertainty and unresolved intention. Walter spends most of *A Life- Drama* in despair over his inability to write—his pain is that he cannot produce. Not only does *A Life-Drama* not contain much action, its hero is unable to think of worthwhile plots for his own poems.

What all three of the heroes can think of, however, are striking images and passionate language. Distrusted by many critics for their own sake, these phenomenon also embody the Spasmodic preoccupation with states of consciousness elaborated in dramatic verse, an interest they shared with Browning in his dramatic monologues, Barrett Browning in *Aurora Leigh*, and Tennyson in a great number of poems including *Maud*, *In Memoriam*, and *Mariana*. For the Spasmodics, these states of consciousness belong, moreover, to poet-heroes who, being poets, must exhibit a heightened awareness of the world that explains the "gaudiness" of their images.

Dobell's principle of the subjectivity of poetry is seen as threatening to many Victorian critics (like Arnold) who turned away from the particular, in search of something more broadly representative.

Critics specified another problem that they related to Spasmodic lack of cohesiveness: their poems were too long to be so allegedly empty. This Spasmodic expansiveness, I suggest, is brought on by a self-reflexive quality in the poems that allows them to recede into themselves, mirroring their own (lack of) structure and playing on an awareness of themselves as text. *Festus*, *Balder*, and *A Life-Drama* all feature poet-heroes who at some point, usually around the middle of the poem, describe to a listener a poet who is writing a very long poem. Upon further description it becomes clear that this poem is in fact the one the reader is holding. There are also in all three poems multiple extended scenes in which the poet-hero spends hundreds of lines reading aloud his own work in progress—usually shorter lyrics or dramatic monologues that have nothing in particular to do with the rest of the poem. In *Balder*, Balder reads aloud uncompleted pieces from his portfolio only to condemn everything he has ever written, leaving the reader holding useless writing; writing that, as dead weight, reinforces its own materiality more than anything else.[5]

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[5] *Festus* in particular exemplifies this strange fecundity of self-reflexive Spasmodicism. It was published originally in 1839, seemingly too early to be included in the Spasmodic canon with *A Life-Drama* (1852) and *Balder* (1854). Because it went through an extraordinary number of editions—at least eleven in England and more than thirty in America, growing over the course of its remarkable career from 8,000 to nearly 40,000 lines—it has always been accepted as part of the pack. Bailey revised each time a new edition was issued, sometimes deleting or rewriting scenes, but most of the time adding more. Work that was not successful on its own went into *Festus*. The result is confusion approaching chaos, the kind of seeming disorganization beyond salvation by any plot or unifying action.

Despite allegations that Spasmodic poems were too long, too glittery, too little meaningful, a glimmer of appreciation for Spasmodic language comes through. In the course of their condemnations, several critics turned a phrase of Smith's against him. In *A Life-Drama*, Smith writes of "a great diamond on a threadbare robe," which becomes in the hands of critics a synecdoche for the entire poem: jeweled language and frayed morals (*A Life-Drama* 63, qtd, for example, by Patmore in "New Poets"). Despite the clever vitriol of this line of attack, diamonds in themselves have had appeal whether or not they hang on old clothes. Even critics as hostile as the ones I have been quoting use positively-weighted words like "striking," "jeweled" and "brilliant" to refer to the really good bits in Spasmodic verse. From critics who were generally friendly to overtly hostile critics like Aytoun and Patmore, reviews were full of quotations culled from sprawling Spasmodic poems. Although this is not an unusual style of Victorian criticism, these poetic fragments were celebrated by critics as almost unreasonably good, given the poems from which they emerged. William H. Smith, in a review of *Festus* for *Blackwood's*, found "lightening flashes of real genius" against a background of "utter recklessness of all the demands of art" (416). As Patmore puts it in an 1856 review of "New Poets," " . . . here and there, nevertheless, amidst this surprising display of ignorance of humanity,—an ignorance much too profound to be attributed to anything but a natural defect of feeling . . . we are startled by a true thought . . . Or by a piquant touch of description . . . Or by a brilliant phrase" (352). Perhaps the best example of pleasure in Spasmodic language is the tenth anniversary commemoration of *Festus* with

Beauties of Festus Compiled with a Copious Index by a Festonian, a gilded volume offering Bailey's most delectable tidbits.

These fragments surface from Spasmodic poems with all the appeal of recovered buried treasure, all the appeal of the archeological dig. In *Victorian Sappho*, Yopie Prins argues that the Victorians were fascinated with the poetic fragment. This helped fuel the great vogue for recovered Sapphic fragments, but the increasing use in the nineteenth century of the unmoored name "Sappho" to signify "a 'representative' woman who embodies the very possibility of such representations, allowing them to multiply in often contradictory forms" meant that "Sappho" signified not so much an identity as a lack of it. (Prins 15). Eventually, "Sappho" became "the perfect model for the papier-mâché monument, a hollow construction plastered with poetic fragments like shreds of paper, easily torn apart to reveal an absent core: disintegrating on the outside and empty on the inside, an evacuated figure" (Prins 184). Aesthetic interest in the fragment, coupled with a fear of empty non-signification, helps explain the appeal and threat of Spasmodic poetics. Bursts of heightened emotion—fragments of experience—are the trademark Spasmodic expression of being. However, the random, subjective, metaphoric quality of these fragments rendered them nearly incoherent in a teleologically oriented age.

Although the Spasmodics, unlike Sappho, were corporeal Victorian personages with houses and friends to substantiate them, something of the same threat of hollowness applies to them because of their ponderously long poems held together with metaphoric gilding, explaining why the Spasmodic fragment garnered as much distrust as it did desire. If there is nothing of substance holding the fragments

together there is no real poem and if there is no real poem there is no real poet, just a vacant center.

All of the Spasmodics were at one time or another charged with "borrowing": from Goethe, from Keats, from Byron, from Shelley, even from each other. Soon after the poem was first published, the *Athenaeum* dismissed *Festus* as "a mere plagiarism from the *Faust* of Goethe" (quoted in Birley, 173). An exposé of Smith's presumed plagiarism from Keats also appeared in the *Athenaeum*, sparking a public defense by W.M. Rossetti. In 1875, the *Athenaeum* contributed again to the charges of plagiarism surrounding the Spasmodics, remarking that Sydney Dobell's posthumously collected poems "remain what Pope is reported to have pronounced the 'Psyche' of Dr. Joseph Beaumont, a "book from which to steal" (483). Although this is not an accusation, it does add, even in the vacuum of actual plagiarism, to the idea of (poetic) identity-theft permeating the nineteenth-century discourse about the Spasmodics.

Reviewers' suggestions of plagiarism, bolstered by a sense of essential lack created by sparkling Spasmodic images with no thematic center, reflect an inability to pin down and locate the individual creative selves in these poets, paired with a sense that it is important to be able to do so. The passages of their poems selected for notice in reviews and in collections unmoored the words from the poem, just as accusations of plagiarism and delineations of indebtedness confuse the separate identity of the poet. The plethora of Spasmodic words and images, the pages and pages of text, ominously suggest the impossibility of originality and the inconclusive nature of experience. The Spasmodics thus became the specter of futility, of failed purpose, of

nonexistence masquerading behind outrageous images. To a contemporary audience, their poems had a pointlessness made painful by the violence that yoked together incoherent images and the sensual yearning coursing through their poems—poems that are, significantly, all about writing poetry. Though critics kept the talk on the surface, complaining about form and language, the reaction against the Spasmodics points to a deeper concern about the nature of poetry, language and identity in mid-Victorian England. The Spasmodics seem to suggest the possibility of a poetics that does not hold itself responsible to logical connections between language on the one hand and plot and theme on the other. For their reviewers, this could lead the Spasmodics into both mental and personal trouble. The Spasmodics thus disturbed deep-rooted Victorian ideas about the connections between the unfolding logic of theme, development and plot, and the cohesive identity of the author-figure.

In poems about writers writing poems, Spasmodics refuse the pleasure of action for the pleasure of writing itself. Composition and language are their themes, but critics like Arnold and Kingsley distrusted language without the rooting principle of action. Spasmodic poems threaten the reader with the spectacle of language for its own sake, largely unattached to narratological or thematic meaning. The Spasmodic were often faulted for their language; but, as Buckley points out, they had "a fairly coherent philosophy of incoherence" (43). It should be possible to read their concern with composition not as a stylistic sin, but as the trademark of a different kind of verse. In a way, the expansive and self-referential condition of Spasmodic verse was the perfect representation of the Victorian age. Advances in science, developments in technology and industrialization, and the expansion of empire created a Britain that

was almost too big to contain itself. New technologies were moving outward. Railways were being laid down, medical sciences were pushing at the frontiers of the body just as industrialization was expanding the limits of productivity. The Spasmodics had a similar aesthetics of expansion and creation that was threatening to an age that saw itself as spinning almost out of control. Victorian interest, almost obsession, with taxonomy suggests a need to pin down, describe and categorize as much of the natural world as possible. Reactions against the Spasmodics could thus be read as reflecting larger fears of incoherence. Poetry that not only did not make an appeal to universal human emotion but also refused to even resolve itself into a coherent whole could be menacing to a Britain that felt itself already fragmented.

Extravagant Power: Spasmodic Overflow

Spasmodic poetry, I have been arguing, was threatening because it undermined a teleological understanding of human experience. Moreover, I would add, Spasmodic emphasis on the isolated striking metaphor as the defining unit of poetry meant their poetry became almost too rich for audiences who looked to poetry to reflect their own emotions. When Arnold wrote that all poetry should be about the great actions of humanity he meant that poems should take as their base something everyone could empathize with, "actions . . . which most powerfully appeal to the great primary human affections: to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race" (1272). Narratives allow writers a set space, a sequence of action, in which the identity of the characters and the empathy of the readers meet within the familiar conventions of realism. In half-slipping the bonds of narrative,

Spasmodics seemed to be worrying and questioning their link with the real world and their moral duties to reflect the hearts and minds of the reader. Their flood of beautiful, useless, fragmented images created a poetics of excess, of language that could not be held in check by their neglected narratives or any ordering system. In effect, Spasmodic poems threatened to overflow the limits of unity and evenness that mid-century critics ascribed to poetry. In this section I will argue that Spasmodic excess and overflow is described in reviews as a sometimes dangerously rampant, sometimes redemptive energy that courses through these poems. At times it seems that the electric current of these poems is what links them, the hallmark of the school. For many critics, this linguistic energy implies a sense of power and heightened emotion; at worst, however, it risks tipping into insanity.

Some nineteenth-century reviewers noted this quality more disparagingly than others, but most agreed that it was a remarkable characteristic not to be found in much other contemporary poetry. There were those who labeled it "unusual extravagance" (Patmore on Smith, Dobell and Bailey in "New Poets") or "a certain rude exaggerated dramatic power" (Aytoun on "the Spasmodic School" in "Firmilian" 533) or "the *violent* style of writing we have to condemn" (William H. Smith on the third edition of *Festus* in "Festus"). On the other hand, it could also be "rich and full of life" (Kingsley on Smith in "Alexander Smith and Alexander Pope" 454) or "teem[ing] with power, . . . a wild wealth of life" (Charlotte Brontë on *Balder* in a letter to Dobell quoted in Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, 512). In the following section, I will concentrate on three reviews, by William H. Smith, Gilfillan, and David Masson, to demonstrate the range of responses critics had to the excessive

emotional heights reached by these poems. Throughout, I will attempt to give the excerpts reprinted by these critics in order to clarify as far as possible exactly what they meant by "energetic" verse, although it seems that many reviewers thought such a quality was obvious and needed no explanation. In their responses, these critics articulate both the threat and appeal of poetic turbulence to Victorian conceptions of verse.

William H. Smith's 1850 *Blackwood's* review of the third edition of *Festus* is premised on a conviction that "Mr. Bailey has the true poetic fervour in him" (417). However, this fervor escapes all the bounds of propriety, spilling over into mental derangement. According to Smith, *Festus* lacks evidence of "the control which the poet exercises over his own mind, in order that he may not allow the fervour of imagination to carry him beyond the pale of common-sense, or the frenzy of his passion to bear him away from the sympathy of all other mortals" (415). The result is "a work which so often degenerates into a mere *poetic rant* . . . where reasoning and imagination both run riot together; where the logic is as insane as the maniac frenzy that is dancing with its flaring torch about it" (416).

Smith quotes several passages from *Festus* to exemplify what poetry born away by passion looks like. One example is Festus' advice to a student of poetry: "Once / Begun, work thou all things into thy work, / And set thyself about it as the sea /About the earth, *lashing at it day and night*" (quoted in Smith 418, emphasis Smith's). As a bit of advice, Smith finds this irresponsible. It leads to an aesthetic of intensity and radical, rabid inclusiveness: not only are "all things" crammed into poetry, but everything is constantly worked up into a feverish pitch. Smith goes on to

quote the kind of poetry that comes out of following Festus' advice. He offers the following lines from *Festus* as "what we have attempted to characterize as *poetical rant*—imagination grown raving and delirious": "All things talked thoughts to him!—The sea went mad, /And the wind whined as 'twere in pain, to show / Each one his meaning; and *the awful sun / Thundered his thoughts into him;* and at night / The stars would whisper theirs, the moon sigh hers . . ." (quoted in Smith 419, emphasis Smith).

What makes this passage "raving and delirious" seems to be the same thing Smith found exceptionable about the first passage I quoted. Both of these passages include the phrase "all things"—implying that poetry can and should encompass everything, granting everything the same hyperbolic significance. In the second passage, which is meant to describe the nature of Festus as a poet, the entire physical universe communicates directly to the poet. The tone of the one-way conversation is feverish; the sea is mad, the wind in pain, the awful sun thunders. Festus's vision is cacophonous, and Smith implies that in the chaos common sense and truthfulness are sacrificed. He quotes the passage "the awful sun / Thundered" to emphasize the absurdity of a sun (rather than a storm) doing the thundering. Here Bailey's exaggerated energy has overflowed into error and misapprehension, or, as Smith has it, deliriousness.

While the laws of realism are often suspended in verse for the sake of poetic language or imagery, Smith argues vehemently against such license. Smith's distaste is based on the specter of an overly fecund world pouring forth its profusions to the poet without ever stopping or slackening, even as the striking images of Spasmodic

poetry threatened to overwhelm both poem and reader with their prolixity. His criticism of this trait in *Festus* takes place largely in terms of style. The surface coherence of the poem is at stake when the poet sustains himself on fervor. Lost is "the survey and revisal in a calmer moment of what has been poured forth in the excited hour of original composition: the blotting out, the compressing together, the shading down . . . all those labours, in short, by which language is made translucent and harmonious" (415). Armstrong argues in "The Role and Treatment of Emotion in Victorian Poetry" and later in *Victorian Scrutinies* that critics wanted a "calm" surface to their poems. For mid-century Victorians, emotion in poetry "could only be exposed if it possessed a kind of transparent serenity, limpidity, composure. It could not be raw, violent, messy, disturbing (in fact, most of the things one might reasonably expect of the expression of feeling)" ("Role and Treatment" 8). The "translucent and harmonious" quality that Smith desired was lacking from the Spasmodics, who were nearly always raw, violent, messy and disturbing. Smith, in concordance with most Victorian critics, wanted a flow of thought and emotion that would render both the surface of the poem and the heart of the poet completely clear, knowable. The fervor in Bailey's verse sends ripples through both, distorting his language and his mental health.

Other reviewers were quick to note a similar lavishness of pulse in Spasmodic poetry. Writing about Sydney Dobell's *Balder* in *A Gallery of Literary Portraits*, George Gilfillan called the poem "the richest volume of recent poetry next to *Festus*." Furthermore, "it is a 'wilderness' of thought—a sea of towering imagery and surging passion" (46). Like Smith's review, Gilfillan's emphasizes motion: the poems are

"surging" and incapable of resting. They produce excess; they seem never to stop. Moreover, there is a kind of ambivalence built into the language of these reviews, even Gilfillan's overtly positive one. Things that are "towering" and "surging" can be invigorating as well as unpleasantly overwhelming, even violent. One of Gilfillan's favorite passages is quoted as an example of this "towering" and "surging" quality: Balder, speaking of his writerly ambitions and qualifications, describes "Thought, Labour, Patience,/ And a strong Will, that, being *set to boil/ The broth of Hecate, would shred his flesh/ Into the caldron, and stir deep, with arms/ Flayed to the seething bone, ere there default/ One tittle from the spell—these should not strive/ In vain!*" (*Gilfillan's Literary Portraits* 48, emphasis Gilfillan's). Gilfillan's emphasis underscores the gory, overtly physical violence inherent in the act of creation. Balder will write, but his bones will seethe with the effort. The question of how the energy created by all this excitable violence shall be harnessed and what use it shall be put to was by no means clear or comfortable.

The 1909 Everyman's Library edition of *A Gallery* appends to this review a slightly embarrassed note by Gilfillan revising his initially positive take on *Balder* in the face of the overwhelming hostility of other critics, especially after *Firmilian.* Gilfillan, in retrospect, admits that "*Balder*, with all its power and brilliance, has certainly a degree of disease in it. It is a great organ cracked . . . it is disfigured with obscurities and affectations . . .Its very finest passages are marred by diffusion and *diabetes verborum*" (61). Power and brilliance have been downsized and anthologized into diffusion and clinical over-talking.[6] The fact that this language

[6] It is also telling to note that nothing changed about *Balder* between the time Gilfillan wrote his review and when he wrote the addendum to it. Gilfillan emerged from the throes of his near-adoration

exists unproblematically beside Gilfillan's earlier praise suggests that this kind of Spasmodic poetry teeters on the cusp of acceptability and rejection, at least for readers like Gilfillan. The energy they valued could quickly be turned against the poet; even at best it was dangerous. Gilfillan liked a degree of danger in his poetry; he did, after all, admire Byron. But, as Patmore cautioned, reading the work of "the spasmodic school" (by which he meant specifically Bailey, Dobell, and Smith's work) was "the most distressing operation to which we have ever been under the necessity of submitting our understanding" ("New Poets" 341). Gilfillan took heed of such warnings. The threat of the Spasmodics, even to their staunchest supporter, was that they unleashed a powerful but vaguely defined something—formlessness, a poetics not based on logic, rampant violence—that could electrocute or madden.

In an 1853 review of Smith's *A Life-Drama* and E.S. Dallas' treatise *Poetics: An Essay On Poetry*, David Masson muses over Dallas' ideas about the nature of poetry as he gradually explicates his own poetics, a theory based on libratory creative energy.[7] For him, poetic intensity was never dangerous, and I will end this section by citing his meditations on poetry to describe the ways Spasmodic poetry might be read as generative and redemptive.[8] I quote the following section as much to clarify his

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to find that almost everyone else who mattered hadn't really liked it. Here the winds of critical opinion were powerful enough topple *Balder* from "surging" to "cracked," recapitulating the way critical opinion has wiped clean almost any trace that the Spasmodics were ever thought good, or even that they were read at all. No one wants to back a losing horse.

[7] David Masson (1822-1907) was a frequent contributor to periodicals and served as professor of English Literature at University College, London from 1853 to 1865.

[8] Masson takes *A Life-Drama* as an example, but most of his essay addresses broader questions of poetics (he only turns to Smith in the last few pages). His work is applicable to the Spasmodics generally, rather than Alexander Smith alone, because the "energy" he finds in Smith correlates so well with what the other critics have described in *Balder* and *Festus*. Additionally, his essay bears some similarity to Dobell's lecture "Nature of Poetry" in that both men celebrate a self-generating poetics based on the image.

theory as to draw attention to the remarkable force of language, the energy and optimism, with which he describes the mind of the poet. If

> . . . the universe of all accumulated existence . . lie[s] under one like a sea . . [the poet will] brood over it creatively, careless of how it is held together, or whether it is held together at all, and regarding it only as a great accumulation of material to be submitted further to the operation of a combining energy, and lashed and beaten up into new existences. This is the mood of the poet. The poet is emphatically the man who continues the work of creation; who forms, fashions, combines, imagines; who breathes his own spirit into things; who conditions the universe anew according to his whim and pleasure; who bestows heads of brass on men when he likes, and sees beautiful women with arms of azure; who walks amid Nature's appearances, divorcing them, rematching them, interweaving them, starting at every step, as it were, a flock of white-winged phantasies that fly and flutter into the heaven of the future. (308-9)

Masson here describes a "combining energy" as the nature of the poet, figuring the poet's mind as a kind of electrical storm that will violently whip all physical and mental elements of the universe into novel forms subject only to the lawless laws of the poet's imagination. He goes on to explain that poets harness their considerable power of mind to produce "the artificial concrete" (311), lucid, material images that

embody the poet's emotions and perceptions. These images are the most fundamental units of poetry, and they contain all the generative energy of endlessly budding seeds. Masson quotes a passage of Keats in which the idea of life passing away is expressed in seven different concrete metaphors: "But even this does not exhaust the creative force; the idea bodies itself again in the new imaginary circumstance . . . the idea still buds, still seeks to express itself . . ." (316). The creative force of the poet is endless and almost self-generative: "the idea bodies itself." I have already mentioned the problems these images posed for other critics, such as their tendency to give way to glittery language and their ability to overwhelm the forward momentum of the poem, but here I want to point out that at the root of poetic composition, for Masson, is a creative, image-generating force analogous to that of nature itself. This is a poetics of ceaselessly fertile creative flow. Unlike Wordsworth's famous definition of poetry as a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," Masson's poetics cannot conceive of overflow because there can be no such thing as too much.

Masson found in Alexander Smith's *A Life Drama* the illustration of his theories. In this context, "there is a strength, and fervor, and vehement humanity about [Alexander Smith], which it is refreshing to find in a young writer, whether poet or not, in these days of prim, and nerveless, and monosyllabic literature" (330). Masson's odd word "monosyllabic" suggests a volubility in Smith's work, an outpouring that scandalizes any sense of "prim" restraint.

Masson's championing of Smith's Spasmodic "vehemence" takes place against a critical background in which critics seemed largely fearful about the fate of poetry. In the same year as Masson's essay, Kingsley wrote a review of Smith that

also began with a statement on poetics in general: " . . all around is winter—a mild one, perhaps . . .but, like all mild winters, especially prolific in fungi, which, too, are not without their gaudiness, even their beauty, although bred only from the decay of higher organisms, the plagiarists of the vegetable world. Such is poetry in England" ("Alexander Smith and Alexander Pope" 452). And, three years later, in a review of contemporary poems including *Balder*, Margaret Oliphant described the state of contemporary poetry in a similarly foreboding way: "Ours is only a twilight kind of radiance, however much we may make of it. It differs sadly from the full unclouded shining of the Day of the Poets which is past" ("Modern Light Literature—Poetry" 138). Critics saw contemporary poetry in autumnal tones, as a slow sad genre that fed itself disconsolately on memories of the past. There was a general looking back, a nostalgia and sadness that permeates much discussion of mid-nineteenth century verse. While George Eliot dismissed Dobell as dull in *The Westminster Review*, Masson, Gilfillan and Clough (to whom I will turn in the next section), wrote hopeful essays suggesting the energizing powers of Spasmodic writing could revive the contemporary poetic landscape.

Interestingly, the quotations Masson uses from Smith to demonstrate the poet's strengths take as their subject the need for a great poet who will be able to immortalize the age in verse, a need Bailey and Dobell also expressed. Masson is not only making a comment about the revitalizing nature of what others have called Smith's excess, but also suggesting that this "excess" could transform and extend the social role of poetry itself. This is Smith, as quoted by Masson:

. . . As the air

> Doth sphere the world, so shall his [the looked-for
> poet's] heart of love—
> Loving mankind, not peoples. As the lake
> Reflects the flower, tree, rock, and bending heaven,
> Shall he reflect our great humanity.
> And as the young spring breathes with living breath
> On a dead branch, till it sprouts fragrantly
> Green leaves and sunny flowers, shall he breathe life
> Through every theme he touch, making all Beauty
> And poetry forever, like the stars. (332-333)

Masson admits that this is "the enthusiastic utterance of a juvenile commonplace," but he also believes that "the fervour of the passage no one can deny; and a mind that can feel about poetry in such a strain of enthusiasm, is one rich in promise" (333). According to Masson, Smith will need to refine his verse, but in the meantime, he provides a passionate recording of a passionate need for a hero/poet/king who will create a poetics of love encompassing all humanity, even those who don't read poetry, even those who are not British citizens. Like Masson's budding images, this is a poetics of regeneration, of "Beauty / And poetry forever."

Border Patrol: The Limits of Poetry

The loosely-drawn bigness of Smith's "Beauty / And poetry forever" suggests an endless sprawl of verse. I have argued that the Spasmodics, with their violent energy, over-long poems, yearning desire, and incoherent images, were seen as

overgenerative and overflowing, both textually and thematically. In this section I want to suggest that Spasmodic fecundity threatened what I will characterize as a mid-century concern with chalking out the limits of what poetry should and shouldn't be, what it should and shouldn't represent.

Returning for a moment to Masson's essay on poetics: he is more interested in the generative role of poetry than in attempting to limit what he sees as the free processes of creation. Poets, he argues, have limitless access to metaphors and analogies because they can explore in verse, through the use of the characters and personas they create, states of feeling and states of mind not actually their own, new conditions that will give rise to new images. Here, Masson echoes William Johnson Fox's famously enthusiastic review of Tennyson's early poems in its excitement over the poet's ability to find constantly renewable inspiration in various states of mind and sensuous experiences. Masson notes that poetry's inclusive nature is "an important consideration, for it links the poet not only with what is poetical in itself, but with a whole, much bigger, world of what is unpoetical in itself" (314). For Masson, the poet can extend outward, inhabiting limitless states of mind with limitless potential for poetic expression that will only breed more of itself. In *Victorian Scrutinies*, Isobel Armstrong writes that Masson's theory "grants the poet a freedom, a moral and imaginative license, simply not envisaged by the Victorian critic" (39). There is energy coursing through Masson's own writing: he is excited about the possibilities of a free-ranging poetry. But most other critics, as Armstrong goes on to point out, were more interested in curtailing than expanding the poet's range: for Masson, "the emphasis is always on the enlarging, extending power of

poetry and the immense variety of new experience to be explored, whereas the bulk of critics, including Arnold at this time, stressed the circumscribing of experience" (*Victorian Scrutinies* 40).

Armstrong sees Masson as exceptional because he defies a "circumscribing of experience" that expressed itself in concerns over whether poetry ought to take contemporary themes, over how subjective poetry could be without becoming eccentric or grotesque, and, most broadly, over what made a series of verses "poetic." The terms of these debates are familiar enough; at stake here is the need to police the form and content of poetry, to monitor the boundaries of its reaches. The last words of Arnold's "Preface" are "let us transmit to [future writers] the practice of Poetry, with its boundaries and wholesome regulatory laws, under which excellent works may again, perhaps, at some future time, be produced, not yet fallen into oblivion through our neglect, not yet condemned and cancelled by the influence of their eternal enemy, Caprice" (1278). Arnold calls for vigilant attention, a kind of border-control police work that will keep "undesirables" like capriciousness and laziness out of the realm of poetry. Arnold's language parallels discourses about national identity that define willfulness and languidness as non-British and threatening. Many nineteenth-century reviewers shared with Arnold a concern about enforcing the boundaries of "good" or "pure" poetry.

The Victorians were certainly not unique in wanting to hammer out a necessarily limiting definition of Poetry—one need only consider the number of times they quote Aristotle's attempts at the same. However, in the mid-nineteenth century critics saw themselves as living in a time when these definitional urges were

particularly urgent. With Goethe's belief that "we must take care of the beautiful, for the useful will take care of itself" in mind, Kingsley wrote, "And never, certainly, since Pope wrote his Dunciad, did the beautiful require more taking care of, or evince less capacity for taking care of itself." ("Alexander Smith and Alexander Pope" 452). He continues that some contemporary poets are susceptible to "the temptation of wishing to make the laws of the universe and of art fit them, as they do not feel inclined to make themselves fit the laws, or care to find them out" (456). Oliphant, William H. Smith and Aytoun all claimed that critics were often not critical enough, especially of the Spasmodics, suggesting that firmer guidelines for the approval of poetry ought to be sought. In the course of condemning *Festus*, Smith warns that "Criticism, if it has any office, or duty, or voice left in the world, must protest against a species of literature which would set aside all the claims of good taste and good sense, in favour of a bold, original, reckless and unregulated imagination" (Review of *Festus* 416). In the nineteenth century, the Spasmodics were primary targets of the regulatory role of criticism. Kingsley first applied the name "Spasmodic" to them in the course of an essay that seeks to separate "good" poetic models from "bad": from the moment they were named, they have been in the process of being expelled. In the following, I explore some tactics of this expulsion.

The Spasmodics, as writers who challenged the limits of the acceptable, were often represented as another type of undesirable: the uneducated social-climber. Their defenders praised the Spasmodics for their ability to write verse about teeming city life. On the other hand, the most adamantly anti-Spasmodic critics represented their overflow and lack of constraint as class transgression, linking the Spasmodics

not only to the noise and clutter of industrialization, but also to the "shameful" ambition of commercial artists who want to embrace high art.

Arthur Hugh Clough, in a review of "Several Volumes of Poems by Alexander Smith, Matthew Arnold, and Others" for the *North American Review* in 1853, describes, like Masson, the rampant energy in Smith's *A Life-Drama*, but he attributes it to a movement of poetry away from pastoral countrysides and into the city. *A Life-Drama*, while it does not address urban life directly, deals with the ambition of a young man who wants to win fame by writing poetry, alienates himself from society by egotistic behavior, and then reenters it by writing a best-selling poem and getting married. Clough links the energy of Smith's poem to the energy of the city: "we have seemed continually to recognize the ingenious, yet passionate, youthful spirit, struggling after something like right and purity amidst the unnumbered difficulties, contradictions, and corruptions of the heated and crowded, busy, vicious, and inhumane town" (1256). Clough finds a poetic vigor in Smith's portrayal of a young man trying to get ahead in the world, but more than that he believes urban centers can produce poetry. For him, "the true and lawful haunts of the poetic powers" are no longer gentle pastoral scenes but "upon the solitary bridges of the midnight city, where Guilt is, and wild Temptation, and the dire Compulsion of what has once been done—there, with these tragic sisters around him, and with Pity also, and pure Compassion, and pale Hope, that looks like Despair, and Faith in the garb of Doubt, there walks the discrowned Apollo . . ." (1256). Clough's discrowned Apollo could be Walter, the poet-hero of *Life-Drama*, who metrically rages with guilt and temptation on "solitary bridges" at midnight. This review makes

industrialization and the urbanization of labor into poetic strengths that "satisfy a want we have long been conscious of" (1256).

In this sense, the Spasmodics were ideal poets. Both Smith and Dobell came from mercantile backgrounds—Dobell was a wine merchant and Smith a textile mechanic in Glasgow, while Bailey's father worked as, among other things, a hosiery manufacturer. These backgrounds reflected an expanding middle class of poetry readers who would have lived in the city and been familiar with "crowded, busy, vicious" streets. Despite the fact that most Spasmodic poems are not overtly about cities or money or the daily life of the urban poor, they are linked with class in a way that was more problematic for many critics than it was for Clough. In an 1856 review of "New Poetry" Patmore specifically blames the popularity of Bailey, Smith and Dobell on the ambitious poor and uneducated who have recently begun to exhibit "a vulgar vanity of connoisseurship": "To this vanity, infecting classes which a few years ago were relatively unsophisticated, we must attribute the strange phenomenon of poetic reputation, and even popularity attaching to . . . the 'spasmodic school,' . . . whose verse does little else than contradict the right definition of poetry" (340). This kind of criticism, linking the Spasmodics to the working classes and thus enabling a dismissal of their poetry, was prevalent enough for Isobel Armstrong to echo it in her quick explanation of why the Spasmodics were so disliked: "For the Spasmodics were a threat to the dominant literary culture, a threat because they seemed out of control, a threat because their social origin . . . gave them a doubtful and ambiguous status . . ." (*Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, Politics*).

Aytoun, in the essay that popularized the term "Spasmodic," describes their pretensions to poetry in the same language with which he describes class pretensions:

> When the painter of the tavern sign-post, whereon is depicted a beer-bottle voiding its cork, and spontaneously ejecting its contents right and left into a couple of convenient tumblers, talks to us of high art, Raphael, and the effects of *chiaroscuro*, it is utterly impossible to control the actions of the risible muscles. And, in like manner, when one of our young poetical aspirants, on the strength of a trashy duodecimo filled with unintelligible ravings, asserts his claim to be considered as a prophet and a teacher, it is beyond the power of humanity to check the intolerable tickling of the midriff. (534)

The Spasmodics, as ridiculous as commercial painters dreaming of "high art," are stuck down with the beer drinkers—even worse, Aytoun implies they can't be trusted not to spill beer in the midst of their tawdry ravings.

In an essay for *Companion to Victorian Poetry*, Cronin points out that the Spasmodics were attacked most brutally by Aytoun in *Blackwood's*. He quotes an anonymous reviewer's assertion in that magazine to the effect that "none but liberals and progressionists" need apply to the Spasmodic School of poetry (297). Certainly Aytoun's passage above suggests a keen interest in enforcing the separation between artists and those that paint (or versify) for their bread. Isobel Armstrong argues in *Victorian Poetry* that the Spasmodics cannot be understood in class terms alone, since their working-class status combined with the fact that none of them (except maybe

Smith as a young man) could be described as poor, fell between established stereotypes such as "self-educated artisan" or "poor peasant" (170). Cronin, however, reads the Spasmodics largely through their struggles, as working-class poets, to be taken seriously. He suggests that the sensual images and passionate longings in Spasmodic poetry might in fact encode political and class aspirations: "Spasmodic poetry might be described as the characteristic radical poetry of the mid-century, the radical poetry written by those who found themselves, after the failure of the 1848 revolutions, without a cause, and hence without a theme" (298). Thus, for Cronin, the Spasmodics—young men longing for political or social recognition—end up writing long poems about poets who try to win fame by writing long poems. Within these poems, the amorous adventures of the main characters signify not sexual desire, but social desire. In "Alexander Smith and the Poetry of Displacement," an earlier version of Cronin's hypothesis that Spasmodic sensuality encodes desire to break down class boundaries, Cronin argues that "Smith projects onto the women of the poem [*A Life-Drama*] all the dreams and anxieties of his [working] class" (136). Thus, when the hero of that poem is sexually aggressive, he is also acting out revolutionary desires (Smith, Cronin notes, was present at the 1848 riots in Glasgow), and when he is pensive and melancholy, he is also deploring his lack of proper education and social respect. While Cronin seems hasty to reinscribe Spasmodicism's trademark sensuality into more tangible class terms, his reading of the ways class affected the careers of the Spasmodics is persuasive, and goes a ways towards explaining Aytoun's outraged reaction against Spasmodic class "pretensions."

In the critical effort to police the boundaries of poetry, the Spasmodics were not the only ones excluded. Gilfillan, the critic whom Buckley calls "the patron saint of Spasmodic genius," was also exorcised from the canon (*The Victorian Temper* 50). Accused very often, and not kindly, of being too "enthusiastic" in his praise for the Spasmodics, he was targeted as a ridiculous source of indiscriminate critical adoration in Aytoun's *Firmilian*. His character enters the poem, wondering aloud "Why do men call me a presumptuous cur,/ A vapouring blockhead, and a turgid fool,/ A common nuisance, and a charlatan?/ I've dashed into the sea of metaphor/ With as strong paddles as the sturdiest ship/ That churns Medusae into liquid light, / And hashed at every object in my way" (*Firmilian* 543). His fate in that poem is to be the victim of ironic serendipity: wandering about bestowing immoderate praise on an illiterate vegetable seller's song and longing, like the Spasmodics, for a hero-poet from the working classes to usher in a new age of poetic achievement, he is crushed by the falling body of such a poet. It isn't surprising that Aytoun, who prized formal unity and heroic actions above all else, should dislike Gilfillan's poetic politics. Moreover, Gilfillan, like Smith and Dobell, did not enjoy any of the advantages of class: the youngest son of a Scottish minister, he inherited little and received little formal education in his youth. Still, Gilfillan did have considerable influence over some writers of his day. Buckley quotes Carlyle on the nature of Gilfillan's writing—"a strange, oriental, Scriptural style; full of fervour, and crude, gloomy fire,"—and concludes that "For nearly a decade he [Gilfillan] exerted an influence on early Victorian taste second only to that of Carlyle" (*Victorian Temper* 49-50). That Gilfillan, once an influential critic, disappeared with the Spasmodics suggests that the

debate over Spasmodicism moving past poetry to a much wider concern about the way emotions and ideas are generally represented (whether in verse or prose), and the ways that the valuation of poetic expression are inflected by class status.

Firmilian: Prurience and Laughter

" . . . [W]e do not hesitate in assigning the spasmodic prize to the author of *Firmilian*"

--Aytoun, "Firmilian: a Tragedy"

In May of 1854, shortly after the publication of *Balder* and *A Life-Drama*, William Edmondstoune Aytoun published in *Blackwood's* a review of a parodic poem, *Firmilian*, by a fake author, T. Percy Jones. The poem was to represent the best of the Spasmodic school: "those who admire spasmodic throes may possibly be inclined to exalt [Percy] to the very pinnacle of fame . . . there is a method in his madness—a rapidity of perception and originality of thought, which contrasts very favorably with the tedious drivellings of some other writers of the same school" (533). Aytoun's poem, from which he quotes heavily in the review and which he later published separately with the subtitle "A Spasmodic Tragedy," was an astoundingly successful attack on the Spasmodics, giving them their name and parodying them so well and with so much humor that even Smith and Dobell thought it one of the more amusing things they had read. *Firmilian* casts Spasmodic turbulence, violence and lack of restraint as moral transgression exaggerated to the point of absurdity. The seriousness of these transgressions and their coating in the acerbic language of parody insured that "Spasmodic" would be one of the most

effective negative epithets in the history of English poetry. In fact, by choosing parody as the medium for critical intervention, Aytoun invited critics not to take Bailey, Smith or Dobell seriously, a fate from which they are only now on the cusp of recovering.

By combining humor with serious criticism, Aytoun makes the Spasmodics seem not dangerous but absurd—more like children misbehaving than men breaking rules. His use of a medical term suggests a shameful physical disorder, an immature inability to exhibit will, dedication. Like "Spasmodic," "Firmilian," is an ridiculous name, with its melodramatically overwrought echoes of "vermilion." Oliphant perhaps summed up the critical reception of *Firmilian* when she confessed to finding the hero Firmilian "more comprehensible" than his models Walter, Festus and Balder because he was clearly a parody of a poet rather than a serious poet who acted like a parody of himself ("Modern Light Literature" 134). This suggests that Aytoun had hit on something inherently absurd about the ambition of the poet in Spasmodic poetry. A *Life-Drama*, *Festus* and *Balder* are all recognizably part of what we consider a Romantic tradition in which the poet exists outside of normative social contracts. On the first page of *A Life-Drama*, Walter claims: "For Posey my heart and pulses beat,/ For Posey my blood runs red and fleet; / As Moses' serpent the Egyptians' swallowed,/ One passion eats the rest. My soul is followed / By strong ambition to out-roll a lay, / Whose melody will haunt the world for aye, / Charming it onward on its golden way." Meanwhile, Balder hopes that his epic-in-progress ("Thou tardy-growing work that art to be/ My club of war, my staff, my sceptre!" 347) will bring him "Not Fame but Power./ Power like a god's and wielded as a god!"

(345).[9] *Festus* is less overtly concerned with the role of the poet than the other two, but Festus describes the poet as filled with power 'as a cloud/ In every fibre feels the forming wind" (419, 3rd American edition).

Aytoun characterizes Spasmodic ambition thus: ". . . they regard poetry not only as a sacred calling, but as the most sacred of any—that, in their opinion, every social relation, every mundane tie, which can interfere with the bard's development, must be either disregarded or snapped asunder" ("Firmilian" 533). The egocentrism of the poet who put his own relationship with poetry before the relationships that make up society is condemned by nineteenth-century critics who were moving away from admiring Byronic isolationism and towards a more civic ideal. Oliphant worried over the self-obsession of the poet for whom "alone of all men must the heavens and the earth be blurred over with a miserable I" ("Modern Light Literature—Poetry" 126).

Firmilian, our "hero," is certainly obsessed with his own ambitions. He plans to write a master poem about Cain, just as Walter, Balder, and Festus all strove to write epic masterpieces. He attempts to devote himself to study, but decides in the first lines of the poem that he must instead gain direct experience, as study yields no results for the restless: "Three hours of study—and what gain thereby? / My brain is wheeling to attach the sense / Of what I read, as a drunk mariner / Who, stumbling o'er the bulwark, makes a clutch / At the wild incongruity of ropes, / And topples into mud!" (13) The rest of the poem follows Firmilian as his attempts to write the most important poem of his generation leave him merely muddy.

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[9] Quotations are from the 1860 edition (identical to earlier versions), unless otherwise noted.

Firmilian and the accompanying review transform serious Spasmodic ideas about the role of the poet into gross egomania. Spasmodic poets are characterized as foolish, caught and displayed over and over again in the act of toppling from their self-fashioned pedestals into the mud. Firmilian throbs for fame, but ends up sordidly killing his best friend over money and losing his betrothed because of sexual infidelity. But Aytoun ignores the ways Bailey, Smith and Dobell were attempting to negotiate the role of "poet" in the nineteenth century. Walter's heart beats for poetry at the beginning of the book, but by then end he values social obligations over solipsistic aspirations, acknowledging that "great duties are before me" in addition to only "great songs" (159).[10] Although stars are one of the dominant metaphors for poetic aspiration throughout the poem, in the last three lines, he suggests to his new wife that they leave the garden they have been exploring because they signal cool nightfall: "A star's a cold thing to a human heart, / And love is better than their radiance. Come! / Let us go in together" (160). Going in, for Walter, represents a conversion to normative social forms, health, sanity, family.

Balder too eventually realizes the impossibility of the power he covets, and Dobell intended the unwritten second and third installments of his poem to demonstrate his re-acclamation from, as Dobell puts it, "Chaos" to "Order" (Preface to Second Edition). Even *Festus* ends with God's forgiveness wiping out all of the hero's transgressions. However, like most critics, Aytoun was unwilling to entertain the solitary-genius-turned-loving-husband trajectory the Spasmodics worked out (one that refutes an inflated conception of the poet), preferring a model that never engages the complexity possible in the portrayal of the raging outsider. In fact, his model

[10] Qutations are from the 1859 American edition (same as British first edition), unless otherwise noted.

introduces the pathologized body into the original reception of these poets, freezing them at the level of physical-neurological disease and barring them from just the kinds of development and knowledge their heroes achieve by the ends of their poems. Of course, there is a truth in this as well—epic-length poems full of heightened passion cannot be undone by a few compensatory lines about home and hearth at the end. Aytoun's largest contribution to the Spasmodics' reputation is perhaps that he locates the Spasmodics in the moment at which they are most out of control, the moments in which narrative is slipping away and they are lost in language.

Firmilian links personal sensation and poetic creation. He begins his composition process by poisoning some of his friends, hoping their deaths will inspire him with the ability to write an epic that will "paint the mental spasms that tortured Cain!" (*Firmilian* 18). But, as they die in his absence, he is not inspired with "mental spasms" of remorse, as he has hoped ("on the whole, then," notes Aytoun in the mock review, "his first experiment was a blunder" [536]). Next he explodes a church, but is still unable to write, as no one he knew was injured: " . . . what were these victims unto me?/ Nothing! Mere human atoms, breathing clods,/ Uninspired dullards, unpoetic slaves, /The rag, and tag, and bobtail of mankind" ("Firmilian" 539). Firmilian's belief in his own superiority, born of his poetic aspirations, dictates that in order to truly suffer, and thus be able to write, he must kill a fellow poet, someone whose death will actually mean something to him. Firmilian thus climbs to the "Summit Of The Pillar Of St. Simeon Stylites" to talk himself into his next crime:

. . . We have gazed

Together on the midnight map of heaven,

And marked the gem's in Cassiopeia's hair—
Together have we heard the nightingale
Waste the exuberant music of her throat,
And lull the flustering breezes into calm—
Together have we emulously sung
Of Hyacinthus, Daphne, and the rest,
Whose mortal weeds Apollo changed to flowers.
Also from him I have derived much aid
In golden ducats, which I fain would pay
Back with extremest usury, were but
Mine own convenience equal to my wish.
Moreover, of his poems he hath sold
Two full editions of a thousand each,
While mine remains neglected on the shelves!
Courage, Firmilian! For the hour has come
When thou canst know atrocity indeed,
By smiting him that was thy dearest friend.
And think not that he dies a vulgar death—
'Tis poetry demands the sacrifice! ("Firmilian" 540)

Of course, it is jealousy of Haverillo's economic success, and not poetry, that demands the sacrifice. All Firmilian's fine talk of Cassiopeia's hair and exuberant music is exposed as pat hypocrisy when he reveals his jealousy and economic motives: he doesn't want to pay his friend back. Poetry, with all its implied

grandeur, is set against money, with all its implied grossness, creating a parodic universe in which Art is reduced to grubby economics, and poetic aspiration becomes Spasmodic greed. Firmilian stalls the murder until the other poet reveals he has a third edition in the press. "Forgive me that I tarried," Firmilian cries, pushing Haverillo from the summit ("Firmilian" 542) .

Earlier I argued that one of the ways reviewers dismissed the Spasmodics was by linking them to the degraded tastes of the lower classes. Aytoun's parody demonstrates this by dramatizing economics as the root of Firmilian's desire to write. He doesn't really pant after poetic achievement the way Balder or Walter do. He doesn't really want to probe the mysteries of the world and record them in verse as Festus does. He just wants a third edition. Money is his barely concealed motive, exposing high poetic diction as a slipping Romantic disguise for the insistent reality that the only successful poetry is poetry that sells. In Aytoun's parody, the Spasmodics, with their poet-hero's intense longings for fame, risked displaying something more common: a desire for material success and a direct link to the marketplace.

Worse than money-lust, yet associated with it through the poem, Firmilian's compositional strategies also include murder: he must kill in order to write. About Haverillo's death, Aytoun notes in his mock review, "[t]here is a grand recklessness and savage energy displayed in this scene, which greatly increases our admiration of the author's abilities. He seems, indeed, in a fair way of making the spasmodic school famous in modern literature" (542). The intensity that I earlier described as one of the Spasmodics' defining features is here rewritten as an excess of physical

violence. The force and energy of the Spasmodics that Gilfillan and Masson praised is described as destructive, not at all creative. In fact, Firmilian mistakes violence for creativity, unfitting himself both for civilization and for verse. And Firmilian's violence is also sacrilegious: he blows up a church. Violence against man and God is, for Aytoun, at the root of the poetry produced by the Spasmodics. Like Firmilian's pointless and obsessive murders that are meant to result in poetry but only end in a stalemated frustration, the "Spasmodics" by their very name suffer jarring and meaningless compositional and constitutional jolts that result in what Aytoun thinks of as a kind of anti-poetry.

Having forsaken his plan of writing a master poem about Cain because he could not manifest any feelings of guilt over his repeated murders, Firmilian decides to write about something more in keeping with his personality: love. Plucking a rose for Mariana, his betrothed (who lives, of course, in a moated grange), he asks her if she could bear "To gaze for ever on only this,/And fling the rest of Flora's casket by?" She responds that she would rather "bind it up with more," and Firmilian joyfully responds:

> Thou speakest well my joy, my Mariana,
> To find thy spirit overleaps the pale
> Of this mean world's injurious narrowness!
> Never did Socrates proclaim a truth
> More beautiful than welled from out thy lips—
> "It is by union that all things are sweet."
> Thou, darling, art my rose—my dewy rose—

The which I'll proudly wear, but not alone.

Dost comprehend me? (Review of "Firmilian" 547)

Mariana comprehends, and she is outraged. He produces pale Lilian, which is a shock to poor Mariana, but when he brings out Indiana, both Lilian and Mariana react with complete horror: "A filthy negress!" cries Mariana. 'Shall I share a husband with a coal," Lilian laments. ("Firmilian" 543). Lilian and Mariana, united in their disgust, leave together to alert Mariana's brother, who serves the King, and Lilian's uncle, the chief Inquisitor. It is not so much the waywardness of their lover that pushes them over the edge, but his having selected a black woman. The women's powerful relatives threaten to arrange Firmilian's death, but after all three of his lovers have left him, he is struck, rather suddenly, with remorse and goes mad, imagining a righteous mob chasing him until he throws himself from a mountain.

Although Firmilian is meant to be parodic, it also is quite serious about the immorality Aytoun saw as inherent in Spasmodic poems, both structurally and thematically. Aytoun notes in his review of Firmilian that "we regret to say that [the productions of the 'Spasmodic School'] are often exceedingly profane, not, we suppose, intentionally, but because they have not sense enough to see the limits which decency, as well as duty prescribes." Moreover, "they are occasionally very prurient" (534). Firmilian's rampant energy is expressed in sexual transgression. He is unable to yoke his passions, as the Spasmodics were unable to yoke the striking images in their poem, and he dies in the attempt. Indeed, many Spasmodic heroes have a problem sticking to one lover. Walter in *A Life-Drama* is ultimately faithful to his chosen muse, but not until he has loved and lost another woman. Meanwhile, the

poem contains numerous poems-within-poems in which Walter describes his love for a fictional black Princess. He employs the names "Anthony" as a model for heroism and "Cleopatra" as a model for desire so often that Masson, intuiting an inversion of Eve Sedgwick's premise in *Between Men*, notes "we suspect Mr. Smith's liking for Anthony proceeds from a latent longing for the society of Cleopatra" (Review of Smith and Dallas 343). Balder seems faithful enough to his wife, but he also rebuffs traditional sexual relationships when he plans to murder her in order to write about it. Festus, meanwhile, is chronically unfaithful and takes several lovers throughout the course of the poem, never with any suggestion that he is behaving caddishly. Aytoun complains: "Seriously, it is full time that the prurient and indecent tone which has liberally manifested itself in the writings of the young spasmodics should be checked. . . . [I]n one production of their kind, most shamefully bepuffed, the hero was represented as carrying on an intrigue with the kept-mistress of Lucifer!" (545).

Aytoun means Festus. Walter Bagehot noted a similar problem with Festus in his 1847 review of that poem in *The Prospective Review*, losing sympathy with the work quickly after Festus leaves his faithful, dead lover for the first of many other mistresses. In an 1847 review of the second edition of *Festus*, Bagehot despairs that "no woman is named in the play whom Festus does not fall in love with" (520). He favorably reviews the original lover's deathbed scene, but notes that "from that time forward the work is a succession of scenes having little connection with one another" (522). In this way, Bagehot locates the origin of Festus' sexual unfaithfulness at the same moment as the origin of *Festus*' structural and thematic failure. Thus, the structural cohesion critics sought was aligned with a deeply rooted sense of moral

order, a restrained stability of heart and libido that would foreclose the dizzying fullness offered by these poems.

Aytoun's metaphor for the particular kind of bad poetry the Spasmodics produce is a physically expressed infirmity of the will. Firmilian cannot decide on women, so he will have them all, just as the Spasmodics seem to exclude no gaudy images from their verse. Turning his back on monogamy, Firmilian also rejects a principle of composition based on a unifying theme. The fragmented images of Spasmodic poetry appear in the fragmentation of Firmilian's love life, and we end up again with striking women, like striking metaphors, concealing a poverty of moral thought. Here, presumed Spasmodic indecisiveness seems to threaten not just the structural coherence of poetry but the fabric of Victorian society, which depended on the institution of marriage and the well-run female household. Aytoun's burlesque dismisses the possibility of reading Spasmodic poetry as an examination of perceived sexual morality, or even of reading the sexual questings of the heroes as thematic representations of stylistic experimentation.

Further, Firmilian's promiscuity crosses race lines. Race transgression and poetic transgression combine in a dangerous recklessness when Spasmodic poetry perverts "normal" sexual tastes into longings for the unusual, the exotic as such. At one point, Firmilian tells the story of "a poet," clearly himself, who "as amorous as a crocodile/ In the spring season . . / . . . asserts his right/ To all the Cleopatras of the ooze" and writes dirty songs (too obscene, says Aytoun, to be excepted in his review) about "Invad[ing] the vastness of his lady's lips" (*Firmilian* 48, 49) Critics had often used the language of the exotic to describe Spasmodic poems: Roscoe found *Life-*

Drama to "glow like Bengal lights," while Gilfillan believed *Balder* was possessed of an "Australian wealth of thought and imagery" (57). Clough, as I quoted earlier, compared Spasmodic images to "Chinese boxes" or overcrowded trays of trinkets balanced on the heads of "Italian boys." Aytoun exposes the dangers of the Spasmodics' perceived exoticism, setting *Firmilian* in medieval Spain and broaching the scandal of cross-cultural desire. Spasmodicism is here racially marked, highlighted as other and a risk to domestic values. Nonetheless, the Victorians cultivated a romance with the exotic other, and the Spasmodics fascinated as they repelled. The scandalous appeal of the sexualized racial other, as well as the class transgressor, haunts the contemporary reception of the Spasmodics.

In the face of deep ambivalences about the Spasmodics, the great genius of *Firmilian* is that it is so funny. It did more damage to the reputations of the Spasmodics than "straight" reviews ever could. Even now, when the Spasmodics have begun insinuating themselves back into the canon, it has been in the guise of a potentially fashionable freak show (perhaps an unavoidable guise for any poets tagged by such an evocative name). I began by claiming that it is nearly impossible to write about the Spasmodics without saying what other people have said about them, and I suggested at the time that this is partly due to the *Schadenfreude* appeal of the acerbic contemporary responses to the Spasmodics. Another reason we must start in the past is because it is only by returning to the original reviews, before that damning name had had time to accrue the shame that now taints subsequent scholarship on the Spasmodics, that we can adequately situate them in the nineteenth-

century, particularly in important discourses about poetics. The Spasmodics were taken very seriously by the Victorians, both as threatening and appealing, but I must end with the fact that they were laughed out of this serious countenance.

In making them ridiculous, and especially by linking that ridiculousness to the body, Aytoun's parody submerged the Spasmodics. However, I don't want to lay blame on Aytoun for criticizing poets I am interested in, as Martha Westwater has done to the extent that she must in all fairness note in the Afterward to *The Spasmodic Career of Sydney Dobell* (1992) that "William Aytoun was not a monster" (149). Nor do I want to limit the role of *Firmilian* to that of a historically inevitable anchor, pulling the unlucky Spasmodics out of sight. *Firmilian* insured that any future critical interest in Smith, Dobell or Bailey would be automatically refracted through the prism of the term "Spasmodic." Holding this prism up to the Victorian canon today can provide opportunities for understanding Victorian ideas of poetics and the ways the Spasmodics became outsiders to Victorian verse, associated as thoroughly with bad writing as they were with bad living. In the next few chapters I will demonstrate ways the Spasmodic threat manifested itself in the language of medicine and science (Chapter Two) and masculinity (Chapter Three). In these chapters I will also begin to recuperate a sense of the pleasure available in spasms poetic and material. In *Sunk Without Trace* William Birley writes "I cannot help thinking there is at least one good reason for reading *Festus*: one cannot properly appreciate *Firmilian* unless one has done so" (206). *Firmilian* spins out the pleasure of laughter, the individual units of which are themselves spasms. The Spasmodic poets are remembered in laughter that replicates the process by which they were thought to write. The legacy of *Firmilian*

therefore suggests a way we might reevaluate Spasmodicism's "spasms," a way to again begin considering the pleasures rather than only the flaws of Spasmodic verse. As a leverage point, a way in to the nineteenth-century discussion of Spasmodicism, *Firmilian* works against its subversive aims, displaying side by side with its refutation of Spasmodicism, a joy in Spasmodic verse. After all, Aytoun himself marveled at how close some of *Firmilian* came to good poetry.

Chapter Two
The Spasmodic Disease:
Sydney Dobell's *Balder* and the Poetics of the Spasming Body

The word "spasmodic" has two main Victorian contexts. One was biological science, the other literature. Since the late seventeenth century, "spasmodic" has been popular as a medical term meaning cramp or convulsion. By the nineteenth century, however, it had seeped into general usage, carrying with it a sense of suddenness and agitation. Dickens favored the physical comedy implied by the word: in *Dombey and Son* (1848) when the impoverished spinster Miss Tox is called upon to express her opinions on Dombey's character, she "immediately became spasmodic" with the force of her enthusiastic ejaculations (8). Dickens's use of the word is representative of the most common Victorian usages because he incorporates both an element of the absurd and an element of the material. Being spasmodic is the opposite of being graceful, or calm, or composed, either mentally or physically. Dickens's heroes are never spasmodic.[1]

By the 1850s, when "spasmodic" was applied specifically to poetry, it was taken to mean over-emotional and indicated "a disjointed or unequal style of presentation" (OED). It is in this way that Aytoun described the practices of the Spasmodic poets in the 1854 article that christened them as such, and it is in this sense that the term has endured as a literary insult. The physical absurdity of a spasmodic Miss Tox—whose name alone has medical echoes of "tic"—translates,

[1] In Dickens, the word "spasmodic" accrues to minor, slightly absurd characters like Miss Tox, run-down Mr. Dorrit (see *Little Dorrit* page 617: Mr. Dorrit starts out of sleep "with spasmodic nimbleness"), and articulator Mr. Venus in *Our Mutual Friend* who opens and shuts his eyes "in a spasmodic manner" (88).

for the Spasmodic poets, into an absurdity of style, and Spasmodic poems come to be ruptured by spasms just as physically distressed bodies are wracked by convulsions. In *Barnaby Rudge*, Mrs.Varden reacts strongly to a minor domestic dispute: "And here the incoherence coming on very strong, Mrs. Varden wept, and laughed, and sobbed, and shivered, and hiccoughed, and choked; and said she knew it was very foolish but she couldn't help it . . . and being supported upstairs, [she] was deposited in a highly spasmodic state on her own bed" (147). Spasmodic poets also "couldn't help it," they were thrown into spasms of passionate language and incoherent meter as the heroes of their long poems make a virtue of sobbing and shivering. Nowhere is this more explicit than in Sydney Dobell's *Balder*, in which both of the main characters go mad and Balder envisions himself dissected on an anatomist's table because his body has turned so completely against him. The nineteenth-century reaction against *Balder* was much the same as the reader's reaction to Mrs. Varden: they aren't to be taken seriously. Undone by physically expressed excess, Mrs. Varden and the Spasmodics seemed a shade less than respectable.

Reading the Spasmodics as sick poets whose poems are symptoms and whose bodies (both the poets' and their heroes') are foregrounded by their implied physical distress, one finds it impossible to separate the language of physicality that surrounds them from the verse they produced. As a way of beginning to explore the convergence of the material and abstract contexts for Spasmodic poetry, I will give an overview of the term "spasmodic" in Victorian medical science and its relationship to changing Victorian theories about the body and its network of spasm-producing nerves, before turning to *Balder* as a way of examining this intersection of bodies,

spasms, and language. First, however, it is important to say a few words about the relationship between poetry and science in the Victorian period.

As the work of Gillian Beer shows, it is illuminating to read Victorian literature with an eye to Victorian biological science. It is almost a commonplace of literary theory to say that literature was one of the ways nineteenth-century writers responded to and meditated on emergent issues like evolution, entropy, the physical basis of experience, and the questioning of religious faith. The publication of "Literature and Science," in which Arnold ponders the relationship between poetry's inspirational and science's investigatory roles, and the overt references to a crisis of religious faith in Clough's "Dipsychus" are two examples of such intersections. However, as Alan Rauch cautions in "Poetry and Science" (in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*) only a very cursory understanding of the overlap between scientific and poetic epistemologies is possible if we merely comb Victorian poems for references to science and its accoutrement. In any event, approaching Spasmodic poems in this way would yield little of interest. The characters in these poems are poets, not scientists, and their main interaction with the world is textual. With the exception of some anatomical metaphors and a few references to dissection in *Balder*, to which I will turn later, the Spasmodics seem very much of the Romantic mindset that any experience of "reality" is more intimately related to the interior world of the imagination than the external world of observation and discovery. However, Rauch urges a more careful consideration "not merely of knowledge, but of knowledge structures" (475). That is, we must pay attention to disciplinary ways of knowing if we are to understand the interactions between Victorian science and Victorian poetry.

Thus, if we examine the style rather than the content of Spasmodic poems, it becomes clear that such verse participates in a wider Victorian conversation about scientific discover and the role of the self in the universe. In this context, the rampant energy, accumulated images, and sensuousness of Spasmodic poetry can be read as reactions to materialism.

In Chapter One, I described the endless proliferation of sensuous metaphors as the primary compositional economy of Spasmodic poetry. This, I argued, suggested to contemporary audiences a frightening dissolution of meaning, authorial identity, and moral orientation. In the context of nineteenth-century science, the endless sprawl of Spasmodic metaphor signifies an expansion of another, biological kind. Investigations into the organization of the nervous system revealed that the body contained many centers of volition and even knowledge, rather than one omnipotent brain. In an overview of contemporary medical writing on the nerves, "Mind and Body" (*Edinburgh Review* 1856), ganglia are defined as "smaller centers of action which are not necessarily the seat of consciousness, but in which is seated a sort of unconscious intelligence—or, . . . instinctive perception and volition" (436). This de-hierarchizing of the body evokes a Spasmodic poetics in which a central theme or moral lesson recedes before a host of independently "moving" images. Spasmodic accumulation of metaphor, then, can be understood in terms of emergent understandings of physiology that emphasized dispersed authority and independent, located volition.

Sir Henry Holland's 1852 *Chapters on Medical Physiology* insists that animals and humans have the same basic nervous structure. The similarity between

animals and humans was a central idea of nineteenth-century science, articulated in the evolutionary work of Darwin as well as the medical experiments of Holland and others. Although there were well-documented reactions against such an understanding, some scientists and poets alike were inspired by the multitudinousness that results when all creatures are understood on the same biological continuum. The *Edinburgh* review quotes Holland's awed description of the power of involuntary movement enjoyed by every life form:

> Wherever there is organization, even under the simplest form, there we are sure to find instinctive action, more or less in amount . . . . This is true throughout every part of the animal series, from man and the quadruama down to the lowest form of infusorial life. When we consider how vast the scale is—crowded with more than a hundred thousand recognized species, exclusively of those which fossil geology has disclosed to us—we may well be amazed by this profuse variety of instinctive action; as multiplied in kind as are the organic forms with which it is associated, and all derived from one common Power. (450)

Holland's vision of a pulsing, throbbing world—alive with instinct, if not reason—suggests the intensity and (seeming) randomness of Spasmodic bursts of language, the involuntary nature of the spasm (poetic or biological), and the multiplication of Spasmodic metaphor.

Rauch argues that the orientation of life to biological, evolutionary and environmental factors helped nudge nineteenth-century poetry away from Romantic preoccupation with nature as a source of aesthetic inspiration to which born poets are

particularly sensitive, and towards an understanding of the physical world as indifferently bound by emergent laws of science. That is, it is harder to be a poetic genius if nature does not allow you to recognize yourself as special and specially chosen. While the heroes of Spasmodic poems undoubtedly place themselves in the Romantic tradition of the isolated, sensitive, creative poet, Spasmodic poems also dramatize the plight of the poet in a world that is increasingly indifferent to poetry. Balder (*Balder*), Walter (*A Life-Drama*) and Gerald (*Gerald*) all desperately long to write a masterpiece that will secure them fame, yet they variously endure heartbreak, poverty, social shame, death and madness in their attempts to live as poets in an urbanized, prosaic world. Rauch notes that in Victorian poetry we can hear "both an assertion of selfhood, and, at the same time, an acceptance of the limitations of selfhood in a universe that seems indifferent to the contributions of any single generation or individual" (490). In this sense, the Spasmodics deplore the fate of individualistic, subjective emotion in the light of sometimes dehumanizing nineteenth-century scientific discoveries—as, for example, Tennyson does in *In Memoriam* when he ponders the nature's indifference to personal suffering.

In the rest of this chapter, I read the Spasmodics through a very particular strain of nineteenth-century discovery: research into the nervous system. Spasmodic nerves were understood specifically as pathologized and corrupt; Spasmodic poetry, therefore, has a more explicit association with disease that any other Victorian poetics. An investigation of the Spasmodics and science must take into account not only Victorian interest in biology, but also nineteenth-century theories of embodied sickness . In a way, the Spasmodics were some of the first poets of disability. As

Athena Vrettos asserts in *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Poetry*, health depended on a delicate constitutional balance: "equilibrium was synonymous with health, disequilibrium with illness" (22). The Spasmodics, with their jarring images and glittering language, worked on a poetic principle of "disequilibrium," inviting readers to lose their balance and, by extension, their health.

The Victorian Nervous System and its Spasms

James Mill and the Signifying Body

In 1829, James Mill proposed a biological basis for all mental and emotional phenomena. His two-volume work, *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, argues that the organization of the body is the surest way to begin understanding the broader epistemological organization of philosophy, emotion, language and composition. Mill's theories seem a logical product of several decades of scientific discoveries carefully articulating the body's pathways of nerves and intricate systems of communication between brain, muscle and spine. As Roberta J. Park points out in "Biological Thought, Athletics and the Formation of a 'man of character': 1830-1900," the word "biology" first began to appear in popular publications in 1800. In *British Romanticism and the Science of Mind*, Alan Richardson also describes the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as periods of unprecedented discoveries in the workings of the brain and nervous system. As a result, the whole of the nineteenth century was marked with frequent and often heated public discussions about the material aspects of life and existence. Park concludes that "one result was the elevation of the body to a position of enormous, yet precarious, importance" (9).

Mill's work clearly represents this emphasis on physicality. Its importance was uncontested in both literary and scientific realms. Isobel Armstrong argues that William Johnson Fox's famously enthusiastic review of Tennyson's early poems was inspired by the revolutionary energy of Mill's argument.[2] Meanwhile, Mill's *Analysis* influenced a generation of thinkers to turn away from philosophy and religion and towards biology as a way of explaining our experience of the universe.

Mill proposed a hierarchy of body over mind, matter over God. His analysis of "mental phenomena" begins not with the mind, but the senses. For him, the body was the necessary starting point for those ill-defined principles, personality and soul. Again and again in *Analysis*, he criticizes attempts to explain fundamental principles of life, such as consciousness, through philosophy or other recourses to the high tradition of abstract thinking. The result of such attempts, he argues, can only be profoundly estranging confusion. For Mill, consciousness is simply an awareness of the feelings we receive through our senses:

> In the very word feeling all that is implied in the word Consciousness is involved. . . . Those philosophers, therefore, who have spoken of Consciousness as a feeling, distinct from all other feelings, committed a mistake, and one, the evil consequences of which have been most important; for, by combining a chimerical ingredient with the elements of thought, they involved their inquiries in confusion and mystery, from the very commencement. (171-2)

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[2] See *Victorian Scrutinies*, in which Armstrong points out that Fox's 1831 *Westminster* review of Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* shares with Mill some of the same optimistic faith in the ability of the body to provide a groundwork of almost limitless potential for the mind. Armstrong: "Just as Mill derived all mental phenomena from the physical organisation of man, so Fox makes the material of poetry dependent upon 'The exercise of the organs of sight and sense' common to us all" (16).

"Evil consequences" are immanent when solipsistic abstractions are preferred over plain biological facts. For Mill, a mystical definition of consciousness only obscures the origin of our knowledge of self: our nerves, which produce and carry sensations. Knowable material experience trumps the abstract philosophical tradition, which is tainted by its tolerance of religious mystification and obscured origins. Mill assumes that the body is a knowable, knowledge-generating machine, an epistemological ground zero, through which human nature and language can be analyzed logically and scientifically.

By feelings born of sensation, writes Mill, we know that we are human: "what we speak of is a point of consciousness, a thing which we can describe no otherwise than by calling it a feeling; a part of that series, that succession, that flow of something, on account of which we call ourselves living or sensitive creatures" (7). On the basis of this life-giving flow of sensation, Mill is able to describe everything from morality (we engage in socially-defined "good" behavior in order to receive pleasurable sensations of praise and comfort) to language (which arises from the need for ordering in space and time our flow of sensations). Mill's "flow of something," however, seems to recapitulate the troublesome chimeras of abstract philosophy in its poetic vagueness. Mill rests his theory of material organization as the prime tool for understanding existence on the murky interior workings of the body that even he, with all of his faith in the body as an indivisible subject of sensory and mental phenomena, cannot fully explain. Sensations, for him, are conveyed by nerves. Yet the behavior of nerves are a mystery: "as the nerves in every part of the body are covered, we know not how any external particles [the catalysts of sensation] can

reach them. We know not whether such particles operate upon the nerves by their own, or by any other influence . . ." (6-7). Later, Mill notes that nerves may not only carry sensations, but actually produce them, thus writing themselves into the flow of sensation that composes a human mind: "the nerves and the brain may thus be, not only organs of sensation derived from other sense, but organs of sensations, derived from themselves. On this subject we cannot speak otherwise than obscurely, because we have not distinct names for the things which are to be expressed" (50). Mill's vision of the nervous system pulsing and producing sensations into a blurred network of material feeling indicates both his desire to build an explanation of the world on the building block of the body and the tendency of that body to crumble into constituent parts that cannot be fully explained, or even named.

Mill's flow of sensations seems especially poised to congeal itself into narrative, giving rise as it does in the course of *Analysis* to the shaping force of language. A large portion of both volumes of *Analysis* is given over to an explanation of the various ways the need to register the temporal and spatial dimensions of our "flows of sensation," as well as the need to express their emotional and intellectual impact, results in the formation of language. The basic inscrutability of the nervous system, however, haunts this narrative force by creating the suggestion that any disorder in the sensation-carrying (and perhaps sensation-producing) nerves would lead to a disruption of the flow of sensation and thus to the formation of language. Significantly, Mill, whose writing is crisply logical and direct, cannot at this point "speak otherwise than obscurely" on the subject of nerves. The double-threat of malfunctioned nerves is relevant to both material bodies and bodies of writing.

For Mill, spasms are misfirings of the nerves in muscles that are confounded by particular sensations. As an example of "those painful muscular actions called spasms," he gives "the Locked Jaw," characterized by constant and unrelieved facial spasms that prevent speech altogether (261). The link of troubled articulation, spasms and nerves haunts Victorian medical science, making the term "spasmodic," when applied to poetry, apt but vicious. Although researchers after Mill were able to explain the nerves more precisely, the nervous system was just emerging in this period as a fundamental part of the organization of the body, as important as the brain or the heart. It is only in his discussion of the nervous system that Mill alludes to an uncertainty encoded in his model of the imminently readable body; and it is perhaps a disservice to read *Analysis* for indications of this slippage, as Mill is elsewhere so determinedly closed to any implications of confusion or complication introduced into his system. Certainly, this is the only time he finds himself at a loss for words. However, as the science of the period progressed, later scientists understood the body as a more and more complex system of nerves that did not always act predictably or in accordance with the will. What ensued was a breakdown of Mill's vision of the knowable, along almost exactly the fault lines that emerge from his volumes: the nerves, and their tendency to disruptive spasms.

Mid-Victorian Science and The Spasming Body

Throughout the mid-Victorian period, when the Spasmodics were at their most popular, many medical and psychological works followed in the footsteps of Mill, placing emphasis on the organization of the body, with a special focus on nerves

and nervous disorders. The most influential of these included Marshall Hall's *Memoirs of the Nervous System* (1837) and *On the Diseases and Derangements of the Nervous System* (1841; a pathology-oriented follow-up to *Memoirs*) and Henry Maudsley's *Physiology and Pathology of the Mind* (1867).[3] These texts, although they propound differing ideas with differing emphases, are all united in characterizing the body as a system of dispersed power. For these scientists, the body could no longer be conceptualized as a highly centralized, unified machine. Mill's version of the body included nerves and a brain; the details of the inside of the body were largely irrelevant. As long as the brain, king-like, could process the flow of sensations received by nerves, things were in order. This allowed Mill to discursively treat the body almost as a metaphor for the hierarchical organization of social and linguistic constructs. For Hall, Bain, Maudsley and their colleagues, however, the intricate pathways of the nerves suggested a much less cohesive vision of bodies and behaviors.

Late in the eighteenth century, scientists had discovered that decapitated frogs, when stimulated, could be made to twitch their legs and even hop about. Hall and his contemporaries took these experiments further, discovering that the nervous system worked on a principle of its own, disconnected from the brain, heart and even, at times, the spine. Instead of a centralized nervous pathway leading to and from an indivisible mass called the brain, Victorian science developed a vision of a dispersed nervous system. Peter Logan draws attention to the significance of this ideological

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[3] I have chosen these texts to examine at greatest length because of their contemporary popularity and importance to the history of the development of medical history of the nervous system. Other notable texts on the same topic include: Alexander Bain's *The Emotions and the Will* (1859) and *Senses and Intellect* (1855), Sir George Lefevre's *Apology for the Nerves* (1844), and G. H. Lewes' *The Physical Basis of Mind* (1877).

shift in his examination of literature and Victorian sociomedical science, *Nerves and Narrations* (1997). Logan describes how "The nervous system ceased to be seen as a simple vehicle for sensations and motor impulses. Instead it became reconceived as a network of localized, semi-autonomous centers spread through the body" (166). Linking Victorian ideas about the nervous system to Victorian fiction, Logan points out that one of the main literary effects of the switch from a centralized to a dispersed internal system is the loss of the notion that the body represents truth: "with the diffusion of its structure of meaning, the body ceases to function as a centralized reservoir of knowable truth" (170). Logan explores the implications of a decentralized version of the body on the narrative process; his emphasis is on narrative theory. Here, however, I want to examine ruptures in physical and textual bodies through a study of disturbances of the nervous system in the form of spasms. Rather than emphasizing narrative flow, I want to point out the ways in which the troublesome fault lines of the nerves were rendered visible by spasms.

In *Memoirs* and *Diseases and Derangements*, Hall argues for the existence of a separate subset of the nervous system, not related to the brain but based on reflex and passion.[4] This "Excito-Motory System" controls "the orifices, the sphincters, the organs of ingestions and expulsion, of secretion and is singularly influenced by strong emotion" (*Memoirs* 94). In a description of the Excito-Motory system of nerves in *Diseases and Derangements*, Hall notes the almost religious importance of the brain:

[4] Hall: "I think I have sufficiently proved the propriety, and indeed the necessity, of another subdivision of the Nervous System. Viewing the cerebral or cerebro-spinal portion of the nervous system as the organic seat of *mind,*—of *sensation, perception, judgment*, and *volition,*—and the gaglionic as that of the source of the *movements of the internal muscular organs*, of *nutrition, secretion*, &c. it has become obvious that there is an intermediate portion of this system, not formerly known; viz. that of *all the functions of ingestion and egestion, of exclusions, retention, expulsion,* &c." (*Diseases and Derangements* 2) . Hall (1790-1857) was a noted physiologist and a founder of the British Medical Association.

"upon the cerebrum the soul sits enthroned" (4). Yet he goes on to exempt his second system of nerves from the reign of the regal cerebrum:

> The influence [of a stimulus] on the *vis nervosa* is conveyed, not to the cerebrum, the seat of the soul and of mind, but to the true spinal marrow . . . this organ excites and combines, under the influence of the same power, certain and appropriate nerves into simultaneous action,—mysteriously, and unconsciously on part of the individual,—and a complicated but definite act, of ingestion, of egestion, of locomotion &c. is the destined result. (4)

Here, the brain, the will, any sense of consciousness at all, is completely absent. Through the nerves, the body maintains and acts upon itself, governing itself and keeping itself within a regulated system of eating, voiding and moving—the most fundamental of human activities.

In *Nerves and Narrations*, Logan aptly characterizes Hall's work as "a scientific freak show of encephalic infants, spineless frogs, sexually aroused quadriplegics, and an unfortunate horse" (167-8). Hall's texts do tend towards the gory, as he depicts hundreds of experiments in which headless animals dance, paralyzed accident victims are given surreptitious erections they cannot feel, and a horse with a cleaver dividing her brain is probed into clenching and relaxing her sphincter. Hall is not the only Victorian scientist, however, to record experiments that seem, in retrospect, inordinately grisly.[5] What makes Hall's experiments truly freakish, I would argue, is the fact that he violently forces dead and dying bodies to

[5]In any event, a horrified concern for what went on in the laboratory is not a strictly modern concern. See, for example, *Frankenstein*.

display what all living bodies were found to have: a nervous function divorced from the brain, the mind, the soul, philosophy and God. Hall's bodies tell a truth that was becoming particularly present to the Victorians: the possibility of the body's reduction to matter without mind and the suggestion that there is a materiality that sinks below and extends beyond will or consciousness.

Against this image of the body as a decentralized system of regulatory nerves in charge of producing their own unconscious bodily logic, the real problems come when the system malfunctions. Hall devotes most of *Diseases and Derangements* to an examination of his Excito-Motory nervous system gone awry from trauma, stress, or weakness. The result is what he describes as "the class of Spasmodic Diseases," characterized by painful convulsions, including epilepsy, inappropriate male arousal and ejaculation, vomiting, various twitching and tics, lockjaw, and varieties of whooping cough and cholera. Spasms were particularly indicative of Excito-Motory problems because that system was in charge of keeping things together; it negotiated the due balance of muscles, limbs and tension. It served as the centrifugal gravity of the body, and spasms, as disruptions of smooth movement, figured as sudden failures of the body's own cohesion.

Spasms, for Hall, are hiccups of the nerves. Untouched by will and unrelated to cognition, spasms disrupt the quiet, interior workings of the body, emerging most frequently as powerlessness over the glottis and sphincter, the points of entry to and exit from the body. In many spasmodic afflictions, Hall writes, there is "a peculiar susceptibility of the *excitor* nerve of the general surface, but especially that of the penis" accompanied by "affections of the rectum and of the bladder, and especially . .

. sphincters, impotence, a peculiar sort of *spasmodic paralysis* of the legs, and even of the hands and arms" (340). Those afflicted with spasms, as in epilepsy, find themselves unable to speak coherently, incontinent. The body is disrupted from within, as spasms attack base-level body functions: the ability to swallow, breathe, enunciate, and control bowel movements or sexual organs. Effecting the most explicit, even shameful, of bodily failures, spasms expose the functions of the body that regulate its systems of ingress and egress, its boundaries. Spasms overwhelm a surface-oriented notion of the body as seamless and smooth, making physically obvious the complicated and decentralized processes underneath. Spasms bring with them the anti-logic of the disruption, emphasizing physically expressed chaos, fracture and disarray. When the body spasms, notions of self-control and will are fractured and the body is momentarily beyond the reach of the mind. Threatening a return to Hall's "freak show" of dead bodies, matter without will, the spasmodic body carries with it the threat of pure embodiment without consciousness.

By the late 1860s, when the Spasmodics were still in print but no longer, because of their ungainly nickname, in the first blush of their vogue, the medical term "spasmodic" was expanding to encompass mental as well as physical disorders. Spasms were related to both the body and the mind even in Dickens's early use of the word "spasmodic" to indicate characters whose bodies twitched with the force of their mental discomfort. Henry Maudsley's *Physiology and Pathology of the Mind* is similar to the works of Mill and Hall in that it insists on biology as a principal tool of explanation.[6] Maudsley's contribution to the history of psychiatry is that he was

[6] Maudsley (1835-1918) was a famous late Victorian physician who specialized in early psychology and worked as the resident physician of the Manchester Royal Lunatic Hospital.

among the first to describe the relationship between mental illness and the physical structure of the brain and body. For Maudsley, a healthy brain necessitates a healthy body, and thus he has recourse to the language of nerves and spasms when describing mentally unstable patients. Describing insanity brought on by nervous disorder, he claims that "[t]he real state of the patient is one of irritable weakness: he is unduly impressionable, abnormally excitable, and reacts in sudden impulses of feeling, thought, speech, and action, which more resemble spasms than anything else" (343). Using Mill and Hall's insights about the significance of the body, Maudsley articulates a vision of spasmodic disorder in which the body disrupts the mental field. Describing what he calls "*the insane temperament*," a disposition to mental disorder, Maudsley writes:

> [a person thus afflicted] is liable to whimsical caprices of thought and feeling; and, although he may act calmly and rationally for the most part, yet now and then his unconscious nature, overpowering him and surprising him, instigates eccentric or extravagant actions . . . If it were thought desirable to give a name to this temperament or diathesis, as in algebra we employ a letter to represent an unknown quality, it might be properly described as the *Diathesis spasmodica* or the *Neurosis spasmodica*; such names expressing very well an essential character of the temperament,—that is, the tendency to independent and spasmodic action on the part of the different nervous centers. (224)

Here, Maudsley finds "spasmodica" almost mathematically appropriate for labeling the action of the unconscious nervous system as it ripples (or jerks) suddenly across

the seemingly composed body. For Maudsley, nerve cells themselves produce spasmodic disorders; the origin of the spasm is within the unconscious depth of the nervous system. When nervous centers with a "tendency to independent and spasmodic action" break free of their complex internal system, they "overpower" and "surprise" the victim, whose body has suddenly turned on itself.

The overriding Victorian understanding of the nervous spasm emerges in the work of all of these scientists in terms of a ruined, morally and mentally bankrupt body. Relentlessly embodied and pathologized, the victim of spasms is always overcome, overtaken by pure brute physicality. While Victorian scientists and doctors were putting emphasis on the sophisticated grace of the nervous system, an internal communications system that brought the body into contact with itself, spasms figured as disruptions of the body machine, failures of physically encoded communication. In the Victorian medical imagination, spasms stood in for the difference between a knowable body and a radically disconnected one; a body that could and must signify basic human truths and a body that was almost outside the realm of meaning. Spasms revealed the body as a monstrous mound of flesh, incapable of encoding anything beyond its own instinctual behaviors. They represented the body inarticulate, pre-linguistic. Both evidence and symptoms of the nervous system, Victorian spasms were the manifestation of an internal organizing system that foregrounded the body over the mind, reflex over will. Spasms are rupture points in the internalized, invisible workings of the body, violent breaks in the flow of logic and narrative.

Before turning specifically to Spasmodic poetry, I want to examine for a moment a particularly Spasmodic body: Sydney Dobell's. Halls' Excito-Motory

system was meant to answer one of the biggest questions posed by nerves in the nineteenth-century: What, exactly, is their role of the nerve in negotiating between the will and its physical expression, the desire and the movement? The Excito-Motory system was proposed as a nervous balancing mechanism that held the body together and kept all the parts in communication with all the other parts. Nonetheless, Hall's theory was disproved by the end of the century, and the troublesome interaction between the body and the will remained one of the main preoccupations of Victorian medical science. Sydney Dobell, who himself suffered from an epileptical malady that troubled the relationship between body and will (brought on, in his case, by a spinal injury from a fall—see the end of this chapter), was haunted by this question. In an 1872 letter to his brother, Dobell observes of his illness:

> It has long seemed to me, as the almost involuntary induction from innumerable facts of experience, that if any portion of my head-machinery is wrong, it is that part which connects Will with the effectuating functions. Not "Will" itself, . . . nor the "effectuating functions" themselves—for they all seem right—but whatever organism is the electric conductor, so to speak. . . . My powers of speaking or reading . . . *if taken unawares*, seem healthy; but for my will to *oblige* my powers of speech, of reading, or of thought . . . soaks me with sweat, and strains my whole mental machine. . . . . Even as regards physical efforts the same law seems to hold, more or less. Everywhere, in short, there is neither devigoration of will nor tubsecence of purpose, nor frustration of will or purpose, by

> *malfaisance* of the external doing-machine; but there is profound fatigue, weakness, illness, or what not, of some mediatorial organ. (*Life and Letters of Sydney Dobell* II 381-2)

Dobell is at pains to describe his pains. Something is wrong—not with him, but with his body's ability to express his selfhood. Significantly, he is unable to indicate where the problem might lie, or even if the faulty party is best understood as an electric current or an organ. Dobell's disease has never been exhaustively diagnosed, but it was believed to have been a kind of epilepsy marked by "definite seizure" (Nichol xxviii). In any event, Dobell's mystery illness is particularly evocative of the dominant concerns of Victorian medical science, especially in its torturous undermining of the will. For Dobell, the illness is alienating and frustrating, leaving him exhausted by his attempts to make his will manifest. The Spasmodic poet is unable to understand his suddenly spasmodic body.

Literary Spasms

Maudsley describes the nervous patient suffering from spasms as "entirely incapacitated for the calm reception and discrimination of impressions, the subsequent quiet reflection, and final intelligent act of volition—the complete co-ordination of mental action, which is implied in the highest mental activity; his words and actions are like the idiot's tale, 'full of sound and fury, but signifying nothing'" (343).

Linking spasms to hollow literary production through his quotation of Macbeth, Maudsely suggests that the particular disruption created by spasms is

incoherence and asymmetricality. Caused by "a loss of power of self-control in the individual nerve cell" (224), *Neurosis Spasmodica* brings symptoms that read exactly like contemporary critics' complaints about the rampant energy and fire-work displays of ill-reasoned metaphor in Spasmodic poetry. *Neurosis Spasmodica* causes "an inability of calm self-contained activity . . . and its energy is dissipated in an explosive display" (224). A sufferer of *Neurosis spasmodica* "If he thinks about anything . . . is apt to think about it under strange and novel relations, which would not have occurred to an ordinary person" (294), just as the metaphors employed in Spasmodic poetry struck its critics as strained or maniacal.[7]

Maudsley proceeds to note that those afflicted with *Neurosis Spasmodica* are often surprisingly original writers who nevertheless, again similar to reviews of Spasmodic poetry, cannot sustain a theme or narrative. The difference between a poet on the brink of madness and a genius is "not unlike that which there is between a quiet aim-working volitional act and a spasmodic movement" (297). The poet with a nervous ailment "lacks . . . the power of calm, steady and complete mental assimilation, and must fall short of the highest intellectual achievement. . . . His insight may be marvelously subtle in certain cases, but he is not sound and comprehensive" (297). Like the reviewers of the Spasmodics, Maudsley stresses the disorganization and ultimate formlessness of those suffering spasmodic ailments.

From the moment the term "spasmodic" was applied to the Spasmodic poets, it has been overtly linked to ill-health. In the essay that first coined "spasmodic" as a term of poetic derision, Kingsley noted that in the work of these poets "[c]hronic

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[7] See Isobel Armstrong's *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, page 253, for a short overview of the way Maudsley's theories on madness intersect with the critical perception of the Spasmodics as insane.

disease is taken for a new kind of health" (*Thoughts about Shelley and Byron* 574). In light of the shared nomenclature of disease, as well as the similarities between spasmodic disorders and critical analysis of the Spasmodics, it is possible to read the reaction against the Spasmodics as part of the fear that the body, like very long and confused Spasmodic poems, was not a transparent medium for signification. Additionally, it is possible to read spasms as ruptures in the narrative logic of Spasmodic poems that indicate both bodily and poetic failure. Neither Victorian bodies nor Spasmodic poems resolved themselves into lucid meanings; neither were centralized. Spasmodic poems such as *A Life-Drama* and *Balder* feature poet-heroes who yearn to write masterpieces that will define their age, but who are consistently driven to the point of madness by their inability to produce these essential versions of meaning. Meanwhile, the medically laden label "spasmodic" suggests a surface manifestation of this organizational failure, as Spasmodic poems falter on the material level of their metrically uneven verse and their periodic flights into over-wrought vocabulary. Like the spasmodic body, Spasmodic poems are punctuated and overwhelmed by their own internal chaos.

As Victorian science was foregrounding the body, Spasmodic poems also dwelt thematically on physicality. In the poems no less than the science, the body is a crucial signifier; it must be read for signs and symptoms, and it encodes its own often murky principles of organization. It can easily overwhelm the mind, as in the pathological spasms that emanated from the decentralized nervous system. In most Spasmodic poems, writing has negative physical side effects, leaving poet-heroes ravaged by their own literary ambition. *A Life-Drama's* Walter is weakened to the

point of insanity by his writing: the desire to versify "Rule[s] [his] being with as fierce a sway / As the mad sun the prostrate desert sands" (*A Life-Drama* 33), while Balder has increasingly disturbing images of the decay of his body as his masterpiece lies unfinished. In J. Westland Marston's *Gerald* (1842), the title-character dies from literally loving poetry more than bread. *Festus* can also be read as a meditation on the limits of physicality: Festus's spirit, in the tradition of Dante, is separated from his body so that he can travel to distant planets, the center of the earth, and heaven. After flirting with these disembodied stints, the poem ends with the passing of the entire physical world.[8] The best example, however, of the tendency of Spasmodic poetry towards representations of the sick body is Dobell's *Balder*, in which Balder's insanity is measured by his conflicted ideas about the material body and the abstract soul. In turn, critics took Dobell to task for representing all of this in jerking, incohesive, "spasmodic" language.

Balder is the story of a poet, Balder, who is in the process of writing a long poem he hopes will revolutionize the world. Balder's ambition marks him as slightly mad; as the poems (both the frame poem *Balder* and the internal poem Balder composes) progress, he becomes more and more so. His infant daughter dies (some critics suggest Balder murdered her), and his wife, Amy, goes insane with grief. In fact, the only major character in the poem who is not insane is a doctor, who fails to cure anyone. At the end of the poem, Balder takes responsibility for Amy's madness, claiming to have neglected her for his poetic ambitions, and tries to put her out of her misery by killing her. Before he can lower the knife, the poem ends; *Balder* was

[8] "The body and soul cease; spirit lives: / And gloriously falsified are all / Earth's caverned prophesies of bodyhood" (*Festus*, 3rd Edition, 445)

meant to be the first part of a three-part epic that was never finished. Dobell intended Balder as an example of the sins of contemporary poets, writing in a preface to the second edition that "'Balderism' in one form or another is a predominant intellectual misfortune of our day" (*Poetical Works* 5). However, critics mistook *Balder* for an endorsement of the pathologically intense poet and the work did not succeed. Because of Dobell's close attention to the progressive mental and physical dehabilitation of his hero, however, *Balder* exhibits some of the main Victorian concerns with writing and the sick body. It is impossible, and probably unfair, to attempt a unified reading of Dobell's fragment, but physical deformity, the relationship between ideas and forms, and the power of the will over the body are themes throughout. Studying poetic spasms through a poetic fragment is perhaps appropriate: the first is an interruption, and the second was interrupted. Both carry with them the shadow of unfinished business: nerves unable to make the proper connections and poems unable to be written.

From the beginning, Balder insists that his genius take on material weight, proving itself before the watching world. *Balder* begins with Balder sitting at his study window, musing on his physically inscribed genius. His "throbbing veins" beat to the "supreme and central force that sways the universe" (346). He is so sure of his deeply felt connection to nature and genius that he cannot quite accept the fact that he is physically organized like other men. His material similarity to the rest of humanity haunts him. He asks

> Is it to be bourne . . .
>
> . . . That ye cure

My bodily ailments with the selfsame drug
That heals the fool; that he who should cut off
This right hand with nice science, that foreknows
Each sequent vein and muscle, learned his skill
Upon a felon? That my last death-sob
Will be much like what any hangman hears,
And that the very meanest lips alive
Do speak some word of mine? (349)

Balder wants even his flesh to announce him as unique; he cannot bear to be caught in a body like everyone else's. While medical science suggested more and more strongly that "soul" and "personality" could be explained by the physical structure of the brain and nerves, Balder longed to transcend the common body that linked him to the rest of humanity. He believes his writing, harnessing the power of his poetic subjectivity, should exert a force over his "vein and muscle," transforming him from the inside out. Balder's dissatisfaction with the fact that all bodies are on the most basic level the same signifies a deep frustration with the Victorian idea that bodies encode and produce one's mental state. Balder refutes this relationship in favor of a Romantic model of authorship that sets him apart from other bodies because of his sensitivity and creativity. He wants to be free of the relentlessly mundane significance of the human body.

Balder's relationship to his own body, his fury at the commonness of his flesh, is extended to his poetic ambition; he feels his genius is capable of writing the world so well that it will be transformed: "That I should do it[write a masterpiece poem], /

And be the King of men, and on the inform / And perishable substance of the Time / Beget a better world" (341). For Balder, writing is a form of control over nature, a way of negotiating himself out of his material binds. He envisions himself evaporated from the physical world, gaining his rightful place as a poet-god: "I would have been the wind, and unbeheld / Rase the tall roaring forest" (345).[9] Control over and exemption from the material world is what Balder longs for, even in the opening lines of the poem, when he looks over at his land from his study window and longs to be recognized in turn by the nature without: "Am I but as a fly / Touching the vestal beauties of a maid / Unchidden; intimate but by how much / Inferior? (337). Through his poetic work, Balder hopes to be able to turn the tables and dictate the terms of the physical world. For him, writing is literally creating; to compose is to have power over the material world, like wind over trees.

Balder's ambition to transcend and control the physical world by writing it over is a reflection of the nineteenth-century medical/biological concern with the body. As the body took on importance for its regulatory roles in the daily business of sustaining life, as it became a more and more crucial site for understanding human life, its significance threatened to rival that of the mind or the soul. Balder's paranoia that he may be, after all, just another man among men means that he fears that he, like them, may be prey to the vagaries of the body. The wish for power over the material world is a cleaner, if more controlling, vision in which the mind, ripe with poetic brilliance, can create and control without material interference. Balder seeks to right

[9] Similarly, in *A Life-Drama* Walter longs to "rend this breathing tent of flesh" and exist only in the rarified air of verse (8).

the toppled hierarchy, to assert the power of the authorly mind over the mess of the natural world and the embarrassing commonality of the body.

However, Balder, like Victorian science, is left with the body as a basic unit of comprehension. Balder is incapable of becoming a god, or of overtly differentiating his body from all others. Nevertheless, he tries to exert power over the physical through his own poetry. Balder's masterwork attempts a perfect union of the material and the abstract, creating a world in which the outer shapes of things reflect something true about their essence. Form and content, in Balder's masterwork, will be married in a perfect, always signifying unit controlled by the poet himself. And, when finished, the masterwork will read as an illustration of Balder's own self. He calls it his "material soul" and hopes that it can "smite / Angels and fiends, and shake the shrines of Gods" (538, 539). Unfortunately, Balder has writer's block. His work does not progress; his vision of the entwining of the physical and abstract is frequently disrupted and finally dissolves into impossibility. He never manages to write anything complete.

Balder's poetics always return to the material. His main compositional strategy is something like personification, the grafting of body to the abstract. His masterwork apparently records a metaphoric battle between, on the one hand, Freedom, Truth, Justice, Mercy, Love and Peace, under the generalship of Genius, and, on the other hand, Tyranny, War, Insolence, Fraud and Malice. Although we never proceed far enough in the poem to see the battle, we are introduced to many of the warriors, as Balder frequently reads aloud from his work in progress. Balder personifies each warrior at length, often to the detriment of his over-all progress. On

days when his writing is difficult, Balder gives several rough draft versions of each personification, suggesting the slightly frenzied care and precision with which he brings each abstract concept into physical being. Attempting to describe Genius, he reads aloud several pages of drafts before throwing the manuscript to the ground in despair: "Lie thou there! / Genius is yet unwritten" (359). In Balder's struggling to flesh out the abstract idea with a body that will serve as a transparent signifier of its own essence, it becomes obvious that such a project is almost surely doomed to failure. As the potentially untrustworthy nerves disrupted Mill's version of a signifying, readable body, the tendency of bodies to register things other than their essential natures always contradicts Balder's desires. Balder's effort to create, in his poem, bodies that represent their own truth, is subject to the same disruptions and decentralizations that topple Mill's truth-telling body.

Although it seems that Balder means Genius to triumph over Tyranny, most of the excerpts from his masterwork are personifications of the negative side of the battle. We are shown mainly malformed monsters. Among these nightmare visions of perverted flesh and sick/sickening bodies, the best example comes from Balder's description of Tyranny:

> Lo Tyranny! A Juggernaut . . . upborne
> Upon a monstrous shape for which the brood
> Of creeping reptiles, or the noisome plagues
> Egyptian found no type, nor Hydra old,
> Nor fell Chimaera. High the idol sat,
> Gore-stained, nor arm to seize, nor leg to stand

Had he, but from his breast his branchless trunk
Rose festerous thro' the morning. What he rode
Headless came onward, manifold and one
As a disheveled legion, and far off
Showed like a galley of ten thousand oars
In numberless commotion, nor in stroke
Ordered, but with division infinite
Beating the air; for round its dreadful length
Such moving arms innumerous like a fry
Of twining fiery Pythons plied the earth
Incessant, and, alternate feet and hands,
Bore the black bulk, or with contentious haste
Incredible, before, beside, behind,
In manifold appearance all too slow
To feed consumption, filled the ghastly maw
Of him who sat above, and eyes had none,
Nor human front, nor but a mouth obscene,
Abominable, that for ever yawned
Insatiate, driveling from its carrion sides
Infernal ichor. Wide the cavern gaped . . .
The hot and hideous torrent of his dung
Roared down explosive, and the earth, befouled
And blackened by the stercorous pestilence,

Wasted below him, and where'er he passed

The people stank (368-9).

As John Nichol, the editor of an 1875 edition of Dobell's collected works, notes, "the admissibility of such exhibitions of horror as the picture of Tyranny is at least questionable" (*Poetical Works* xvii). Balder's vision of a directly signifying material world is undercut with the suggestion that such enterprises can lead to a nightmare world of mythological beasts. As in Victorian science, there is an insistence here on the material fact of the body and its potential for deformity. Moreover, Balder's "branchless trunk" is a creature of no subtlety. All appetite and waste, eating and voiding, his monstrosity is of the most grossly carnal and pre-linguistic desires. Balder's image of the worst of the evil forces he sees on earth boils down to a vision of the body at its least self-aware. Like Hall's Excito-Motory nervous system, the monster works by purely physical reflex.

By the end of the poem, Balder no longer seems to be able to preserve a belief that it is possible to write a world that can be read for evidence of its own truth. He has tried to control the outward expression of abstract ideas through writing, but in the end he finds that the material world contains a force that he cannot adequately harness or control. His hope for a world capable of being easily expressed by metaphor and personification crumbles to expose a madman's vision of a corrupted world, rotting from within. Balder, losing his reason in the face of his wife's progressive insanity and his increasingly frustrated ambition to write, turns his body inside out:

My soul has gone back like a sea on heaps

Before a Prophet's rod; leaving that bare
Which never saw the light—the gulphs and deeps
And all the inland unknown which since the first
It covered but was not. And I sit here
Within my passions; and that writhing round
Of rooted serpents rises like a ring
Of licking flames about me. Some are dead
And others gnaw them. Of the living, some
Lie lank as worms; some roar as dragons; all
Enjoy or suffer; and I see unmoved
How each fulfils his office; coils and glides,
Plays as when Eve stood smiling, warms, desires
Swells, springs, falls, maddens, struggles, twists and dies,
Strangled in its own knots. I see them,--mine
Not me; myself in the hot midst, a cold
Calm lidless eye that neither hopes nor fears
Nor loves nor hates nor smiles nor weeps nor prays. (511-12)

Balder's concern with the inside of his body mirrors growing nineteenth-century medical attention to the internal organs and systems as the origins of various mental or moral illnesses. Balder revisions his body as a den of snakes "strangled in its own knots," turned upon itself. Amid this violent seething, something essential and immaterial that encodes him watches without feeling. His distinction between the snakes and his own essential self—"I see them,—mine / Not me"—points to a

collapse of his desire to write the world into signifying flesh. Here, instead of the body mirroring the soul, the body disrupts everything with its sudden revolt against the will of the poet. Although the snakes may leave him "cold," Balder is at their mercy, sealed in their midst and incapable of escaping the "ring / Of licking flames" they create. As in Victorian medical science, the emphasis here is on the internal workings of the body gone wrong. Under distress, Balder's physical body erupts through the protective layer of his poetic ambitions, becoming sentient and malevolent. In this way, *Balder* seems almost a fictional examination of the Victorian medical conception of the body overtaken by its own physicality.

In the continuation of this scene, Balder further pathologizes his inward chaos, imagining himself on the dissection table of an anatomy class:

> It cannot last. I am a living man
> Not an anatomy for time and change
> To scalpel when they teach the younger gods
> And show them subject man. You heavens, what right
> Makes me the bleeding instance? Why am I
> The paragon of woes? How dare they seize
> These organs to discuss the novel signs
> Of unaccustomed torture? Must I bear
> That they may be instructed; with keen edge
> Distinguish what is mortal from the threads
> Of inconclusive anguish, and in slow
> Discovery one by one dissect away

The stamens of endurance, with fine point
Experimental and touch exquisite
Detect of each rare core the central sense,
Open the vesture of the secret nerve,
Make bare the naked torment and lay out
The warm and quivering Nature styled and strung
For such vital exposition? . . .
. . . Hell itself
Hath no such agony; the very Damned
Are plunged in whole. (512)

Balder refines the snakes, once his "passions," into "organs," switching from the Biblical language of punishment and suffering to the medical language of nerves and dissection. On the doctor's table, Balder is rendered completely passive, entirely the victim of the both the doctors that "open the vesture of the secret nerve" and the body that contains such incapacitating despair. Balder's rage highlights his impotence: his body has rebelled, taken over, and he has ended up physically exposed. Although he has attempted to write his way out of the uncomfortable fact that personality is largely a function of the material structures all bodies share, Balder fails to differentiate himself from any other body. His invocation at the beginning of the poem of the imaginary criminal whose dissected hand would bear a haunting similarity to his own is realized now, as he notes that his punishment, the dissection of his body, is the fate of criminals: "Malefactors, / Who in the last resource of desperate hope / Yield up

their breathing bodies to the schools, / Die under such division" (512). Both the criminal and the poet are finally reduced to their own suffering bodies.

Spasming Poetry

Often, through Balder, we are given images of a body that seems to be caught in the throes of spasms. In a prophetic dream, Balder feels himself suddenly overwhelmed by a poetic mood:" . . .The great veins in my brow / Throbbed with suppression, and such consciousness / I had of coming uproar, rising up / Thro' the containing stillness—as the fire / Of Aetna swells under her dark blind hill / And bursts in desolation—that my lips / Cried out" (377-8). Later in the same scene, Balder describes the physical effects of fear: " . . . our heart-strings over-strung, / Scare us with strange involuntary notes / Quivering and quaking, and the creeping flesh / Knows all the starting horrors of surprise / But that which makes them . . . ." (379). In both of these instances, the body is contorted; heart-strings move and startle the body into quivering, or an "uproar" suddenly upsets "the containing stillness" of the body. The passive body is acted upon by a mysterious, invisible force, as in the disorders of the nervous system. In both of these instances, the will and the mind are uninvolved; the body feels itself convulsed from deep within itself: "My lips / Cried out." Balder, spasmodic, seems to be suffering from a nervous symptom that would eventually subsume Dobell under its name.[10]

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[10] Dobell's nineteenth-century biographer Emily Jolly describes that poet's death-throes in language that replicates the language of *Balder*. Like Balder, Dobell is overwhelmed by a sensation that comes from nature and has the profoundest effect on the body: "Now they were visions rather than dreams that visited him. On two occasions the heavens had seemed to open, and he had felt himself drowned in an ineffable and indescribable efflugence" (II 411). Dobell would have approved of such a poetic, Romantic death-bed description.

The most obvious spasms in this poem, however, are on the level of the text itself, as the metrical flow of Dobell's verse is occasionally contorted by Balder's passions, like a body by its nerves. Thus far, I have read *Balder* as if it were a novel, focusing on plot and theme. Yet novels were never, for the Victorians, Spasmodic. The word "spasm" itself suggests the beats and pulses of poetic meter while at the same time corrupting them into a disease and questioning the logic that determines or frustrates their pattern. The term "spasmodic," as applied to poetry, meant to the Victorians a stylistic contortion as much as a thematic one, as criticisms of Spasmodic poems made no distinction between uneven versification and convoluted story lines.[11]

Logan's theories about the nervous temperament are based on his study of the novel and of hysteria; for him, bad nerves are related to hysterical narratives. The scientists I have described here, however, seem more interested in versification. Mill spends a chapter explaining that poets have a special relationship to language because they see trains of thought as ends in themselves, whereas other thinkers, such as mathematicians, are inclined to push their thoughts through to some kind of conclusion about something. Poets, therefore, have special access to the "flow of sensations" specifically because they do not rely on narrative or the logistics of forward momentum. Maudsley writes mostly about the relationship between madness and poetry, as a little of the former is presumed good for the latter. It seems that Victorian scientists turned to poetry when their studies suggested an examination of literature. Despite this, most contemporary studies of Victorian nerves focus on the

[11] See Chapter One.

novel and the extent to which it mediates, encodes or causes hysteria.[12] This recent focus on the novel has risked forgetting that the Victorians considered the spasmodic temperament a specifically poetic category of nervous disorder in which they understood style and articulation to be ravaged in ways that parallel physically expressed spasmodic disorders of the body. Poetry is singularly capable of encoding spasms because it arguably works by spasms to begin with: poetic meter necessitates a pattern of pulses, while at the same time the tendency towards order and regularity is undercut by a thematic freedom from strict narratological logic.

At points throughout *Balder*, calm language gives way to frenzied language and predictable free verse becomes muddled. The first of these moments occurs in the third scene, where Balder muses that the poetic creations of his mind are always vulnerable to "the touch of any human hand" (31). Struggling with the concept that human physical contact can overwhelm the most powerful ideas, *Balder* lapses from long sentences divided logically over line breaks into short declaratives that pulse out not a unified argument but a series of spasm-like ejaculations, punctuated with intensifying exclamation marks. I quote the following section to draw attention to both sense and form:

> . . . That the head should write,
>
> And, with a gush of living blood, the heart

[12] Logan's *Nerves and Narratives* is one example of the focus on novels that usually accompanies studies of nineteenth-century bodies and texts. Janet Beizer's *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narrative of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (1994), Evelyne Ender's *Sexing the Mind: Nineteenth-Century Fictions of Hysteria* (1995), and Claire Kahane's *Passions of the Voice: Hysteria, Narrative, and the Figure of the Speaking Woman 1850-1915* (1995) all also rely mostly on the novel and other prose forms to examine the body in literature. Additionally, these works are representative of the related focus on gender that characterize studies of the nineteenth-century disordered body. In these texts, hysteria in understood as a traditionally female disorder of the nerves; in the next chapter, I will consider Spasmodicism's overt gendering as a male disorder.

Should blot it! As one proves there is no God
And falls upon his knees. Right sapient sage!
Supreme intelligence! Sole substantive!
Lord of the empty dark! True Prince of Nil
And Nihilo! A royal argument;
But ere thou sign triumphant demonstration
Be blest and let a benefit refute thee!
My little Amy! (352)

This section encodes the pulses and spasms that beat through Balder when he realizes the unfeasibility of an easy privileging of philosophy and poetry over the heart and the body. Here Balder's "spasms" are rendered visible and sensual by the suddenly intensified tone of the writing. As such, they are symptomatic of Balder's despair; they function like a galvanized body, twitching with Balder's discomfort. The poetic spasms mark Balder's mental derangement—but, for the Victorians, they also rendered *Balder* itself "Spasmodic." The poem is taken to be diseased, a symptom of its own nervous disorder.

Balder's Spasmodic verbal intensity is representative of the other Spasmodic poets as well. Alexander Smith and P.J. Bailey contain the same fatal, frenetic elements. *Festus*, often reducible to a wordy philosophical musing, rises to assuredly Spasmodic heights, especially during the climactic scene of the end of the world:

The earth is breaking up; all things are thawing.
River and mountains melt into their atoms
. . .

The sea boils; and the mountains rise and sink

Like marble bubbles, bursting into death.

. . .

. . . The great round world

Hath wasted to a column beneath my feet.

I will hurl myself off it then; and search the depth

Of space, in this one infinite plunge! Farewell

To Earth, and Heaven, and God! Doom! spread thy lap;

I come—I come! But no! (*Festus* 3rd Edition 601-2)

In *A Life-Drama* the Spasmodic heights are more intensely personal, as Walter lays claim to special Romantic status as a deeply feeling poet: "I'd rather be the glad, bright-leaping foam / Than the smooth sluggish sea. O let me live / To love, and flush, and thrill—or let me die!" (89). Walter here rejects outright any sense of internal or external calm, and the intensity of his language mimics that of the "bright-leaping foam" he emulates. Both *Festus* and *A Life-Drama* share with *Balder* a Spasmodic pulse that makes a poetic virtue of disrupting ordered metrics.

The most pointed (and infamous) example of spasming verse comes near the end of *Balder*, as Balder wakes from a dream of Amy's death in which he seems to have played a guilty part:

This dream! why came I leaping out of it

Half-witted and half-dead as one escapes

From dungeons into air. I must have wept, too,

The grass below my face is all bedewed,—

Away!

. . . .

[*Leaps up with disordered looks*]

No, no, it cannot be, it must not be,

It shall not be!—Amy!

. . . You white full heavens!

You crowded heavens that mine eyes left by now

Shining and void and azure!—

Ah! ah! ah!

Ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah!

By Satan! This is well. What! am I judged?

You ponderous and slow-moving ministers,

Are you already met? Are crimes begot

Above? And do we sin to give the train

And hungry following of the stately gods

An office? Doth their pastimes tarry here

Because I lag? Is it to be endured

That while I sleep the ready forum forms

About me, and the conscript fathers wait

The unaccomplished wrong? Hence! Clear the heavens!

Break up! What! . . . (519-20).

As Balder becomes more and more wrought, the lines begin to constrict into shorter and shorter units, weighed with caesurae in the form of exclamation points and question marks. The pentameter breaks down, with some lines carrying as many as two syllables too many and others barely containing three feet. The typical iambs are disordered by the frenzied tone, creating metrical confusion spiked with spondees. The frequent dashes, unusual for Dobell, bring a breathless unfinished quality to the ends of lines, refuting clear syntactical boundaries.

Dobell's infamous "ah!"s are almost unreadable by the standards of most verse, pulsing with emotion and urgency rather than meter or meaning. Calling this hierarchy of passion over order "Spasmodic," the Victorians read it as a physical manifestation of a nervous disorder. Dobell's literary spasms elide with physical spasms to produce a diseased release of energy. The release of energy seems to be a keynote of Spasmodic poems. Reviews used the language of fireworks and explosions, mimicking in a way medical discussions of the firing of synapses in nerve cells.[13] Dobell's beats suggest a disordered, panting body that rings true of Victorian concerns about physicality generally. Thus, the reaction against the Spasmodics can be read as a Victorian fear of the body in the fullness of its new material unpredictability.

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[13] Compare, for example, Maudsley's explanation that in Neurosis spasmodica the "energy" of "an individual nerve-cell" is "dissipated in an explosive display" (*Physiology and Pathology* 204) to W.C. Roscoe's description of the Spasmodics as "the fireworks school" in which the poetry "explodes with a burst of crackers" (*Prospective Review* 116). See also Armstrong, 515.

The Body Poetic; The Body Monstrous

In *The Nervous System of the Human Body* (1844), Sir Charles Bell gives the following case studies as examples of patients suffering from "spasmodic affection" (420).[14] Of a 58 year-old shoemaker named Thomas Brown, he writes:

> At intervals during the day the same paroxysms come on with increased severity. Then the convulsions of the face and neck are of the most violent kind: his arm and shoulder are shaken backwards and forwards with a kind of shrugging motion, and with amazing rapidity, so that the whole body partakes of the tremor. While these very severe fits last, which is for about a minute each time, his breathing is performed with difficulty, and he gasps as if he were submitting to the most extreme suffering. (421)

Of another patient,

> The gentleman who came to see me this morning has the slighter degree of spasmodic affection of the face. There is a tremulous motion of the eyelids of one side, which is sometimes accompanied with a drawing of the corner of the mouth. It begins with a twinkling of the fibers of the orbicularis muscle, and is followed by a sardonic grin, owing to a slight contraction of the muscles inserted into the angle of the mouth; with an agitation of the cheek like the effect of emotion, as if he were about to cry. It comes on when he is anxious, or when people look steadily at him. (413)

[14] Sir Charles Bell was a mid-century professor of surgery at the University of Edinburgh and senior surgeon of the Middlesex hospital.

Bell's monstrous patients bring to mind another monster who was noted for his sensitivity and ungainliness: Frankenstein's monster. Of his spasmodic patients, Bell notes, "I cannot resist the belief that the relation [between the cause of the spasms and the muscles spasming] is established in the body, not in the brain. When a man is decapitated, and when after this, galvanism is applied to the spinal marrow, the body is not universally and equally convulsed, but certain *actions* are performed—horrid grimaces, motions of the limbs" (421). Like Frankenstein's monster, Bell's "monsters" have healthy brains but deformed bodies that display "horrid grimaces" and irregularity of motion. Frankenstein's man-made monster and Bell's spasmodic monsters, whatever their dissimilarities, are above all united in the way they foreground the brutish materiality of the body. It is interesting to note that Spasmodic compositions were described in nearly the same terms. Nichol describes Sydney Dobell's *Balder* as "not only incomplete, but confusingly chaotic; the richness of its imagery is like cloth of gold flung over the limbs created by a Frankenstein" (*Poetical Works* xviii). Frankensteinian to its critics, *Balder* emerges as subject to exactly the same "*actions*" that plagued Bell's patients. As if jabbed by a galvanizing wand, *Balder* leaps into metrical unevenness. As Bell put it, "the body"—here, of writing—"is not universally and equally convulsed."

Against critical readings of *Balder* as a monstrous body, we can compare Dobell's theories on poetry and the body. In the April of 1857, Dobell gave a lecture entitled "The Nature of Poetry" before the Edinburgh Political Institution. This talk is generally accepted to be a defense of Spasmodicism, the only existent articulation of

Spasmodic poetics.[15] Dobell's main contention seems to have been that poems are mainly created by the association of one thing with another set of things: "The Truth on which the inward eye is chiefly fixed becomes a solar centre and other truths are apprehended by excursions from this central point—to which they become, therefore, accessories; each accessory (in proportion to the attention paid to it) itself the centre of still subordinate excursions" (19: also quoted in my Chapter One).

As I noted in the previous chapter, Dobell believes that poems move by association and metaphor; one idea leads to a constellation of others that also expand outwards. Dobell describes this system as analogous to the organization of the human body. He explains that the "inward eye" of the poet dictates the poet's choices of specific images to signify specific emotions: "And this familiar term [inward eye] is no mere figure of speech, for the body is so much the Poem and homologue of the soul that the laws of the inward eye may be illustrated by those of the outward . . ." (*Thoughts on Art, Philosophy and Religion* 17). As the speech progresses, Dobell insists that the body, itself best explained as a "Poem of the soul," is crucial in the production of poetry. The most basic unit of poetry, he argues, is the "perfect utterance." Metrically competent and sensually evocative, perfect utterances are felt as much as understood. To prove his point, Dobell quotes poetry in Greek and other ancient languages, asking his audience to ignore the meaning and focus on the felt

[15]See Isobel Armstrong and Martha Westwater. In "Role and Treatment of Emotion in Victorian Criticism of Poetry," Armstrong examines Dobell's speech as a prefiguration of a modernism in its privileging of images and symbols, while Westwater in *The Spasmodic Career of Sydney Dobell* argues that its questioning of the unified subject clearly presages post-structuralism. What is remarkable about this speech, however, is that it insists on a bodily poetics, a system of poetry that is based on the rhythms of the body. In its concern with nerves and bodily organization, Dobell's lecture is less a presentment of modernism or postmodernism than a product of its time, in which the body was understood more and more as a governing principle.

rhythms of sound. For Dobell, the relationship between the body and poetry was the source of poetry's beauty and pleasure, its universal appeal. As Robert Preyer explains in "Sydney Dobell and the Victorian Epic," Dobell believed above all in "the transforming power of rhythm" to embody the emotions induced by a poem (173).

A turn away from meaning is replicated in Dobell's preference of the body over the mind as a way of truly experiencing and understanding verse:

> It would be easy to show, and I will by-the-bye proceed to show, that the necessary conditions of such perfect utterance could be deduced from those higher data of the mind from which we have drawn the principles of the poem to be uttered: but because I wish to demonstrate the thorough humanity of Poetry—that it not only answers our Divinest faculties but is actually in tune with our material flesh and blood, we will again, if you please, turn to the laws of the body by which the mind receives and conveys sensation. (22)

The rhythms of the body are translated into meter. This, Dobell explains, is the root of poetry. As material rhythms are woven by the poet into a longer piece, the poem grows organically, preserving its privileged relationship to the body. In the end, a poem is organized like the nineteenth-century idea of the nervous system, in which loosely connected ganglia have control over certain webs of nerves, just as Dobell envisions central "truths" in a poem to radiate out into other truths, other poetic centers. "Human psychology," Dobell writes in the notes to his lecture, "seems to indicate that the nervous system is [like an] association of men, and the tendency of all science is to reduce phenomena to the varied illustration of one principle" (67). He

argues that poetry follows suit, growing organically from nervous centers into full-fledged, functioning units of sound and sense. Like Mill, Dobell takes the body as the starting point for an examination of (poetic) language.

However much Dobell may have believed in the synchronic nature of poetry and the body, his poems were fated to become Spasmodic, representative of the breakdown of both those systems. Although the term "spasmodic" is generally taken to indicate failure, it may be possible to understand Spasmodicism as a compositional principle as well. Part of the significance of Dobell's insistence on the links between bodies and poetics is that he eschews logical thought in favor of automatic bodily principles: the heartbeat, the rhythm of breath, the cycle of sleep. Too much art violated this principle of poetry, which depended not on mechanized perfection but an organic, associative creation. Critics, as I described in Chapter One, thought of Spasmodic poetry as Spasmodic largely to the degree that it was disorganized and uneven. For Dobell, a too-precise poetics in which logic and calm dominated over the natural tendency of the mind to wander off and the heart to race would have been the opposite of poetry. Calling these disjunctions "spasmodic," critics pathologized Dobell's verse away from a natural vision of the body and towards a monstrous one.

Moreover, Dobell's defense of his poetry suggests a reexamination of exactly what seeps through when poems are ruptured by spasms. I have argued that these are places where the threat of the disorganized, unconscious body haunts attempts at cohesion and logical narration. However, this does not account for the vast popularity of Spasmodic poems before they became explicitly pathologized by their nickname. Modern critics love to quote Dobell's "Ahs!" as delightful proof of his Spasmodic

absurdity, yet there is also a tremendous and not unpleasant energy released in these lines.[16] Before the Victorians understood them to be diseased, they liked reading the Spasmodics. And even hostile modern critics find a certain pleasure in them, even if it is the pleasure of something that has been stretched to an absurd, self-indulgent extreme. As ruptures in the field of normative aesthetics, poetic spasms allow—if we look beyond the apparent failure of the Spasmodics—the possibility of something like pleasure. That this pleasure was shut down by critics almost as soon as it began suggests something subversive about it, as if it were an alternate way of understanding poetry based not on conventional poetic aesthetics but another kind of sensual pleasure.

By the end of the year in which *Balder* had been published, however, the language and logic of material deformity thoroughly surrounded both Spasmodic poems and Spasmodic authors. The quiet slippage of the term "Spasmodic" from poems to poets can be seen in contemporary reviews of Spasmodic poems that highlighted the physical failure of the poet. Kingsley mockingly suggests that the Spasmodics were suffering from a "highly organized and peculiar stomach-ache" rather than the pangs of eccentric genius to which they characteristically laid claim ("Alexander Smith and Alexander Pope" 459). In a *Blackwood's* review of Alexander Smith's *A Life-Drama* in March 1854, Aytoun warns Smith that he will not succeed in his supposed goal of writing a poem that will capture his age "by uttering profane rant, which as it would not have been justified by the mad despair of

[16] Buckley quotes Dobell's famous monosyllables in *The Victorian Temper*, noting that Dobell has written "surely the most remarkable line of English blank verse" (56-7). In *William Edmondstoune Aytoun and the Spasmodic Controversy*, Mark Weinstein calls the offending section "a line of iambic pentameter even more daring than Lear's use of 'never' five times," adding that "The Spasmodic cannot go further than this" (97).

a Lear or an Othello, is horribly nonsensical in the mouth of a young gentleman who ought to have taken a blue pill because his liver was out of order" (340). These reviews suggest that Spasmodic poets, for all their ranting, do not have access to poetic genius; they are rather suffering from bad digestion or a cranky liver. The recourse to their bodies, especially their unglamorous and even more unpoetic stomachs and livers, makes them seem like fools rather than poets.

Jerome Buckley, about a century later, carries on this tradition of reading the Spasmodics as physically incapacitated. Doing so, he solidifies the pervasive Victorian links between ill bodies and ill verse at the same time as he illustrates how readily sick poems can come to indicate sick poets. Buckley opens a chapter on the Spasmodics in *The Victorian Temper* by comparing an anecdote about Byron to an anecdote about Dobell:

> As Lord Byron swam the Hellespont to emulate Leander's athletic example, so some fifty years later Sydney Dobell mounted a seacoast near Naples to recapture the feelings Saint Paul must have experienced on his arrival in Italy. Both gestures were no doubt dramatic; but Byron's desire was propelled by a physical prowess which assured its fulfillment, whereas Dobell's saintlier ambition was frustrated in the hostility of the earth itself—by the collapse of the earth beneath his feet and a sorry fall into a subterranean cavern. (41)

This comparison informs Buckley's reading of the Spasmodics, as for him they are always ridiculous failures aping Romantic heights. However, although Buckley goes on to describe Spasmodic poetry as a type of literature, he begins his section with a

comparison of bodies: Byron's fit, masculine body, well suited for love and heroism, to Dobell's weak, incompetent body, prey to embarrassing accidents.[17] The physical difference between the men is that of being in control (Byron) and being out of control (Dobell). As in Victorian concerns about the body whose malfunctioning interior systems might rupture its smooth, functional surface, Dobell's body is pushed off balance by forces he cannot control; in this case the rumblings and shiftings of the earth rather than his nerves. But the effect is the same. Betrayed by an unforeseen accident, Dobell's body is ungraceful and unpoetic. Even the ground he stands on is Spasmodic.

[17] Note that Buckley favorably compares Byron's physical prowess to Dobell's despite Byron's actual physical handicap. Here, the material absurdity of Spasmodicism overrides even the historical fact of Byron's club foot.

Chapter Three
Spasmodic Masculinity and the Poetics of the Body Weak

In his comparison of Byron and Dobell's athleticism, Buckley interprets Dobell's "sorry fall" as a signal of the ways Spasmodic poets fail to live up to their fit predecessors. Byron's "desire" was underwritten by his "prowess"; Dobell, the "saintlier" poet, remains "frustrated." Significantly, Dobell is not even allowed to own his wobbliness: he doesn't topple because he isn't graceful, and (unlike Byron) he doesn't have a club foot to blame it on. Completely passive, he falls because the "earth itself" has become "hostile." It can no longer support Dobell, just as Victorian England became incapable of supporting Spasmodic verse. In Buckley's anecdote, Spasmodic poetry figures as such an unstable body that the physical world quite naturally shrugs it off. In this chapter, I will argue that the Victorian rejection of Spasmodicism, which Buckley echoes here, encompasses not only a style of verse, but a kind of masculinity that the Victorians found increasingly distasteful.

Despite Byron's actual physical infirmity, he emerges as able-bodied when considered side by side with Spasmodic Dobell because Buckley so completely identifies the physical display of masculine strength with the ability to write poetry properly.[1] A few paragraphs later, he argues that the Spasmodics were ultimately unsuccessful poets to the extent that "none would submit to the formal discipline requisite for the proportioning of an epic structure" (41). Sustaining epic structure, for

[1] Comparisons of Dobell's body to Byron's were not, in any event, unusual. Emily Jolly, Dobell's biographer, quotes a letter from Dobell's brother: "those who knew Byron personally, said that Sydney's face recalled his . . . . But Byron's head, though of similar proportions, was small, while Sydney's was exceptionally large, some three inches larger in circumference than the ordinary full-sized man's head, and the height was even more remarkable than the length" (II 282). Note how Dobell, yet again, appears somewhat ridiculous when compared with Byron.

Buckley, requires something akin to Byron's ability to keep his head above water all the way across the Hellespont. The Spasmodics lack the "formal discipline" that would smooth their spasms into a well-proportioned, controlled poetics and their bodies into capable, powerful machines.

This crucial lack figured for the Victorians as a damning effeminacy.[2] The spasming body, as I suggested in the previous chapter, was monstrous evidence of a prelinguistic physicality unmediated by the mind or the will. As the Victorians became more and more concerned with willpower as a condition of middle-class masculinity, unpredictable spasmodic bodies and formless Spasmodic plots came to signify failed masculinity as well as failed poetics. Medical spasmodic behaviors, twitching and grimacing, are never exhibited by Victorian (or, for that matter, any) gentlemen; similarly, fragmented and emotionally excited Spasmodic poems failed textually to represent the self-control that was coming to define men as such in the middle of the nineteenth century.[3] While the Spasmodic poets themselves—Bailey, Smith, Marston, and Dobell, most notably—were not seen as particularly effeminate, their verse and their poet-heroes were increasingly characterized as such. One month

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[2] "Effeminacy" I here define, following Kingsley's characterizations of the Spasmodics, to mean something less than masculinity, usually signifying a lack of will-power and textual/physical coherence. In this chapter, I focus on Kingsley's critique of the Spasmodics as effeminate because Kingsley wrote influentially about both masculinity and the Spasmodics. Other critics, such as Margaret Oliphant in "Modern Light Literature" (*Blackwood's* 1856) and William Edmonstoune Aytoun in "Alexander Smith's Poem" (*Balckwood's* 1854) mobilize similar critiques of Spasmodic effeminacy.

[3] As numerous scholars have pointed out, there were many types of masculinity in circulation for the Victorians. See, for example, Andrew Bradstock (ed), *Masculinity and Spirituality in Victorian Culture*; Andrew Dowling's *Manliness and the Male Novelist in Victorian Literature*; Donald E. Hall, *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*. I focus on Kingsley's Muscular Christianity, with its attendant rhetorics of health, strength, will, and self-control, because this is the definition of masculinity the Spasmodics were consistently seen as violating, and most Victorian critiques of their gender identity operate along these lines.

before he published the essay that coined the literary term "Spasmodic," Charles Kingsley wrote a review comparing Alexander Smith (shortly to become one of the most Spasmodic of the Spasmodics) to Alexander Pope. Of the two Alexanders, Pope emerges, like Buckley's Byron, completely victorious. Kingsley explicitly aims to make Smith and those who write in a similar strain "ashamed of their unmanliness" ("Alexander Smith and Alexander Pope" 456). While Smith's *A Life-Drama* is "without coherence or organization," Pope partakes of an "antique clearness" that emanates from "the nobler and healthier manhood" and "the severer and more methodic habits of thought" which allows poets like him "a manful possession of their subject" (456). Smith, on the other hand, disintegrates like the ground beneath Dobell's feet at Naples: he has no self-possession and his poetry is therefore "altogether fragmentary" (459).

Kingsley, one of the seminal definers of Victorian masculinity as a matter of will, repeatedly casts Spasmodic poetry as effeminate. Arguing against Spasmodic formal incoherence, he describes the poetry of Smith and his like as "the offspring of an effeminate Nature-worship, without self respect, without true manhood, because it exhibits the poet as the puppet of his own momentary sensations, and not as a man superior to nature . . ." ("Alexander Smith and Alexander Pope" 462). Here Kingsley recapitulates the language of contemporary medical writing, in which the spasming body is also enslaved to momentary (nervous) sensations. The masculine identity of the poet is called into question by his inability to value structural cohesion over flashy metaphor and, by extension, his celebration of the erotic pleasures of sensation over the Spartan virtues of self-renunciation. For Kingsley (and even, half a century later,

for Buckley), the problem with the bright linguistic "fragments" that made up Spasmodic poetry is that they were as incapable of sustaining meaning as spasmodic bodies were of sustaining the kind of "desire" that propels one across the Hellespont and all the way to the end of a unified poem. Spasmodic bodies, textual or otherwise, were incapable of drawing themselves together into a subject position of authority. In this chapter, I argue that Spasmodic fragmentation (of texts and of bodies) kept them outside of most Victorian rhetorics of masculinity, which congealed around self-containment, self-discipline, and will-power. My reading of Spasmodicism emphasizes a poetics of the body weak, a poetics that encodes pleasure in masochistic self-abandonment. In this way, the Spasmodics were able to suggest ("articulate" would be too strong a word) a version of masculinity that went against the grain of most contemporary definitions, one that emerges more fully in the Aesthetic movement near the end of the century. Arguably, the emergence of queer theory and the emphasis on masculinity and the corporeal within women's studies over the past few decades have provided the critical background against which this reading of the Spasmodics becomes possible (as it wasn't for Kingsley or Buckley). Throughout this chapter, I read Kingsley's novel *Two Years Ago*, which features a Spasmodic poet, and Smith's *A Life-Drama* with attention to the ways these texts circulate and question ideas of masculinity through a textual "indulgence" in Spasmodic self-abandonment.

The Real Man and the Bad Poet: Kingsley's *Two Years Ago* and Sensational Narration at the Limits of Masculinity

In 1853, Kingsley writes of the rise of "a spasmodic, vague, extravagant, effeminate school of poetry"—the Spasmodics—whose chief fault lies in their textual preference for Shelleyan extravagance and sentimentality ("Thoughts on Shelley and Byron" 572). Kingsley argues that Shelley is a bad model because of his "utterly womanish" nature. Byron would have been better, but general cultural trends were against him:

> [This] age is an effeminate one; and it can well afford to pardon the lewdness of the gentle and sensitive vegetarian, while it has no mercy for that of the sturdy peer, proud of his bull-neck and his boxing, who kept bears and bull-dogs, drilled Greek ruffians at Missolonghi, and 'had no objection to a pot of beer;' and who might, if he had reformed, have made a gallant English gentleman; while Shelley, if once his intense self-opinion had deserted him, would have probably ended in Rome, as an Oratorian or a Passionist. ("Thought on Shelley and Byron" 571)

Descended from Shelley, the Spasmodics partake of a suspect Romish sensuality. They are derivative poets whose enervating distance from beer-drinking, thick-necked Byron undermines their textual and physical authority as masculine producers of powerful verse.

Like Buckley's comparison of Dobell to Byron, Kingsley's reading emphasizes evaluative relationships between poets. For both critics, the Spasmodic

poet and the heroic poet make each other visible; their frictive relationship provides the energy necessary for the dismissal of one and the canonical reinstatement of the other. Most Victorian criticism of the Spasmodics follows in this mold: Spasmodic poets are the weaker of a poetic pair that continually serves to reinscribe the Spasmodics as effeminate and derivative. Margaret Oliphant, for example, begins a negative review of the Spasmodics by comparing "the present makers of dislocated verse, whose glory it is to break stones upon the road where the Laureate's gilded coach flashes by" with the "broad, bright manful nature of our greatest English poet [Shakespeare], who was too mighty to be particular" ("Modern Light Literature" 126, 128).

In these comparisons, the Spasmodics consistently end up on the bottom. They are never understood to have influence over other poets, but other poets have remarkable influence over their style (even to the extent that all three of the major Spasmodics were charged with plagiarism; see Chapter One). They are not talented so much as imitative, not powerful so much as willing to be spectacularly powerless. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's term "homosocial continuum" provides a useful way for thinking about the critical relationships between the Spasmodics and other poets, both in terms of their textual harkening back to Romanticism and in terms of the critical impetus to set them up as literary straw "men." Composed of relationships between and among men, the continuum is characterized by a "homosocial panic" that suspends and questions the moments in which relationships between men shade into socially and sexually suspect territory. Victorian reactions against the Spasmodics may become more legible in light of such a panic. For the Victorians, the

Spasmodics seem to have occupied an uncomfortable position in the spectrum of masculine relationships. Although their sexuality was never directly questioned, the persistent critical impulse to cast doubt on their masculinity troubled their gender identification, just as their indebtedness to other poets produced a textual longing that pervades their work.

Moreover, Sedgwick's attention to the shifting and interdependent nature of the cultural structures produced by social relationships among men calls attention to the ways Victorian critics used discourses of comparative masculinity to produce categories of poetic value at the same time that they used discourses of poetic value to produce categories of masculinity. It is never clear if the Spasmodics are bad poets because they aren't masculine enough or they aren't masculine enough because they are bad poets. The chicken-and-egg conflation of bad writing and unclear gendering suggests that none of these categories were particularly stable, although they generated a great deal of cultural anxiety that expressed itself as a fervid critical reaction against the Spasmodics. What kinds of readings, however, are possible if we try to understand the gender and textual unconventionality of long Spasmodic poems as indicative of something other than failure, having something other than what Buckley calls their lack of "formal discipline"? What happens if their brilliant images are read not as incoherent and distracting from the cohesion of the story, but as lyric outbursts layered over narrative in a way that questions poetic representations of temporal experience? What kinds of possibilities are uncovered if their emotional/metrical intensity is read not as excess but as a counterpoint to common Victorian characterizations of male strength through self-control? These questions

may be considered through an examination of the ways the Spasmodics emerged in the nineteenth century (and are often still received today) as failed, physically inferior poets. In the following reading of Kingsley's *Two Years Ago*, I argue that this mechanism is closely involved with shifting expectations of masculinity around the time of the Crimean War and the ways in which the Spasmodics, with their uncontrollable, excessive bodies, were understood to perform—both in their pathologized bodies and their troubled texts—a sensational version of failed masculine poetic identity.

By the middle of the 1850s, when the reaction against the Spasmodics had reached the boiling point, a more militant, physically vigorous ideal of masculinity than had been popularized in Britian's recent past was on the rise, fueled by the Crimean War. In a review of Smith's *A Life-Drama*, William Edmonstoune Aytoun cites Smith's lack of a "root idea, and intelligible theme which shall command the sympathies of other minds . . . ." Aytoun continues: " . . . these obtained, he will shake his faults like dew-drops from his mane; and he will find his tropes, thus disciplined, will not only obtain double force from their fitness, but will be intrinsically finer than the random growths of accident" (351). Note the insistence here on a military language of command, discipline, fitness and force. "Tropes," for Aytoun, are very close to troops; and they are both in need of a strong commander. The Spasmodic poet is crucially incapable of filling this role. As Kingsley puts it in another review of *A Life-Drama*:

> The 'poetry of doubt,' however pretty, would stand us in little stead if we were threatened with a second Armada. It will conduce little to the

> valour, 'virtues,' manhood of any English man to be informed by any poet, even in the most melodious verse, illustrated by the most startling and pancosmic metaphors, 'See what a highly organized and peculiar stomach-ache I have had!' . . . What gospel can there be in such a message to any honest man who has either to till the earth, plan a railroad, colonize Australia, or fight the despots, is hard to discover. ("Alexander Smith and Alexander Pope" 459)

Similarly, Oliphant bemoaned: "We ask the Laureate for a battle-song, and he gives us a skillful fantasia upon the harp" ("Modern Light Literature" 128). Although elsewhere Oliphant draws distinctions between the melodic competency of Tennyson and the passionate indulgences of the Spasmodics, she links them here with her suggestion that poetry was becoming more gorgeous and less useful, less vigorous.

These writers' emphasis on military strength and accomplishment provides a background against which emotional poetry threatens to emerge as frivolous. This concern intersected with Victorian fears about the general usefulness of writing emotive verse professionally when the Crimean War and other imperial projects beckoned. What social good is there in examining subjective feeling? The Spasmodics' brief and untimely popularity coincided with this cultural moment: their perceived effeminacy was experienced as a threat to national security. By serving as a focal point for critiques of textual and physical effeminacy, the Spasmodics helped reify the cultural value of writing as a worthwhile, masculine endeavor. Kingsley's *Two Years Ago*, which tracks the development of two men, a poet and a

doctor/adventurer, throughout the years surrounding the Crimean War, performs this type of reification.

Two Years Ago tells the story of the doctor, soldier and general man of action Tom Thurnall, on the one hand, and the weak, vain, Spasmodic poet Elsley Vavasour on the other. Although Kingsley does not explicitly describe Elsley as "Spasmodic," he embodies all of the traits Kingsley described as Spasmodic in his reviews of Smith: effeminacy, poor health, solipsistic self-obsession, and an ear for fine phrases uncomplicated by an eye for truth. Elsley's given name, John Briggs, and the title of his best-selling poem, *A Soul's Agonies*, also echo the name and work of actual minor Spasmodic poet John Stanyan Bigg and his 1854 poem *Night and the Soul*. In a recent book on Victorian masculinities, James Eli Adams labels Elsley "an effete Spasmodic poet," noting that he "is most obviously derived from Shelley and the Spasmodics" (*Dandies and Desert Saints* 132-3). Vavasour and Tom play out in fiction the dynamics of the critical pairings that ground contemporary and modern scholarship on the Spasmodics: Like Kingsley and Buckley's Byron, Tom is a gallant English gentleman who drinks beer and hunts well, while Vavasour is an absurd Shelleyan sensualist who takes opium, is as scared of spiders as "any boarding school girl," and falls into puddles during at least three crucial moments (153).

The action of the novel takes place before the Crimean War and is recounted by the narrator two years after that conflict. The War itself provides a pivotal turning point in each character's life, but is not described in any detail. Rather, it functions as an absent center around which the novel is constructed and from which it rather obliquely takes its name. Reticence, for Kingsley, was one of the most important

traits of the masculine man: his heroes don't talk a lot and they keep secrets well.[4] The Crimean War's critical disappearance from the book narratologically encodes Kingsley's aesthetic of masculine verbal restraint, just as Tom's stoic silence in the face of repeated trauma reinforces his ability to survive shipwreck, near hanging, imprisonment, estrangement from his beloved family, and the loss of his fortune: "What's done can't be mended, and needn't be mentioned; whining won't make me work the harder, and harder than ever I must work" (38). Elsley, however, is a professional wordsmith; he depends on writing as his main interaction with the world. Throughout the novel, the trope of Elsley's verbal excess marks him as effeminate. The relationship between the two men, characterized by stoic restraint on one side and excess on the other, displaces the Crimean War as the central conflict of the story and the staging ground for the performance of courageous masculinity.

The two men grow up together but part early in life: Tom earns a living by his hands, digging for gold in rugged Australia, while Elsley runs away to decadent London to become a poet. Meetings between the two men move the plot, often coinciding with the revelation of important narrative developments. However, here I would like to pay attention to language rather than plot. In the first of Tom and Elsley's adult meetings, a violent storm marks their reunion in a seaside town. Elsley braves the weather in hopes of getting inspiration for a poem; Tom is meanwhile struggling for survival on a sinking boat. No matter how bad the weather or how imminent the disaster, the narrator almost always strikes a calm, distant, masterly

[4] See Adams' Chapter Three, "Imagining the Science of Renunciation" in *Dandies and Desert Saints* for a reading of Kingsley's aesthetics of masculine reticence.

tone, nearer reportage than sensationalism. At the end of the introductory chapter, the narrator gives us a brief philosophy of his quiet style. The facts of the story

> [S]hall be duly set forth . . . saving and excepting, of course, the real reason why everybody did everything. For—as everybody knows who has watched life—the true springs of all human action are generally those which fools will not see, which wise men will not mention; so that, in order to present a readable tragedy of Hamlet, you must always 'omit the part of Hamlet,'—and probably the ghost and the queen into the bargain. (xvii)

Nevertheless, at certain key moments, the narration becomes charged. I quote the following section to emphasize the sudden and uncharacteristic intensity of Kingsley's prose as Elsley watches the shipwreck:

> [Elsley] struggles up the lane towards the cliff, and there pauses, gasping, under the shelter of a wall, trying to analyze that enormous mass of sound which fills his ears and brain and flows through his heart like maddening wine. He can[not] bear the sight of the dead grass on the cliff-edge, weary, feeble, expostulating with its old tormentor the gale; then the fierce screams of the blasts as they rush up across the layers of rock below, like hounds leaping up at their prey; and far beneath, the horrible confused battle-roar of that great leaguer of waves . . . Suddenly, far below him, a bright glimmer;—and in a moment, a blue light reveals the whole scene, in ghastly hues—blue leaping breakers, blue weltering sheets of foam, blue rocks, crowded

> with blue figures, like ghosts . . . rushing up towards him through the air, a thousand flying blue foam-sponges, which dive over the brow of the hill and vanish, like delicate fairies fleeing before the wrath of the gale. (58-59)

Over the course of several pages, the narrative remains in a heightened state of tense description, spiked with metaphors and vivid colors. Then, suddenly:

> All is over. What shall we do now? Go home, and pray that God may have mercy on all drowning souls? Or think what a picturesque and tragical scene it was, and what a beautiful poem it will make . . . ? Elsley Vavasour—through whose spectacles, rather than with my own eyes, I have been looking at the wreck, and to whose account, not mine, the metaphors and similes of the last two pages must be laid—took the latter course . . .. (61)

For a few pages, Elsley and the narrator overlap. The reader experiences the thrill of the storm and the excitement of witnessing nature's destructive powers, but the narrator, almost immediately after delivering it, undercuts this sensationalism by morally distancing himself from its production. Any titillation produced by this "tragical scene" is suspect for having been delivered by a poet who values description over event. In fact, Elsley's preference for writing over doing is presented as a preference for the feminine comforts of the home over masculine concern for duty: "So the delicate genius sate that night, scribbling verses by a warm fire, and the rough Lieutenant [of the rescue operation] settled himself down in his Mackintoshes, to sit out those weary hours on the bare rock . . . " (61). The narrative is in a bind. If

reticence is a masculine virtue, how can books be produced by men? If it is effete to succumb to the pleasure of a violent seaside storm and the lightning-lit spectacle of a sinking ship, how can the narrator produce pleasure in readers without threatening his masculine authorial identity? Narratologically, the only solution is for Elsley to take the fall, providing the reader with a textual pleasure that is perhaps more titillating for immediately being marked as shameful.

The Spasmodic poet, for Kingsley, will always think of words rather than drowning men. Dealing in "metaphors and similes," he ignores plain truth and direct words to indulge the lyric impulse. In the section quoted above, the narrator/Elsley describes the leaping waves as ghosts, foam sponges and delicate fairies in one sentence. His metaphors stretch out horizontally; no one is preferred over the other, they could go on forever. As I discussed in Chapter One, Kingsley finds Spasmodic metaphors highly suspect in their number and intensity, both of which evade a sense of responsibility to accurate description.

Elsley suffers for his linguistic appetites. At one point in the novel he willfully flees into another storm:

> Poor wretch! He had gone out of his way for many a year, to give himself up, a willing captive, to the melo-dramatic view of Nature, and had let sights and sounds, not principles and duties, mould his feelings for him: and now, in his utter need and utter weakness, he had met her in a mood which was too awful for such as he was to resist. The Nemesis had come; and swept away helplessly, without faith and hope, by those outward impressions of things on which he had feasted his

> soul so long, he was the puppet of his own eyes and ears; the slave of glare and noise. (379)

Despite the efforts of two burly Irish fishermen to rescue him by lifting him "'round arms and body, and set[ting] him down on the rock like a child," Elsley disappears into the storm and resurfaces in the London slums chapters later, a drug addict with not many pages to live (383). The narrative punishes Elsley for his love of sensual metaphor by overwhelming him with sensual self-destruction. He is destroyed by too much of the pleasure ironically available to him only as a corrupt, weak, fragmentary poet.

In another reunion scene, Elsley and Tom cross paths on a rock formation by the shore. Their predilection for meeting by the sea isolates them from the rest of their communities, underscoring the structural and symbolic importance to the novel of their interactive drama. Tom is hunting for a certain zoophyte that might be a cure for cholera; Elsley is hunting for fine phrases: "he was looking out consciously and spasmodically for views, effects, emotions, images; something striking and uncommon which would suggest a poetic figure" (153). While Tom utilizes nature in the name of science, Elsley seeks to drain some good words out of it, valuing those words over the natural objects that suggest them. His attention to construction—language over nature, words over actions—is repeated even in his name. The obsessively repetitive syllables of effete French "Elsley Vavasour" draw attention to themselves as sound units in a way sturdily English "Tom" cannot.

Elsley, however, is not the poet's real name. At the time of his poetic success, he changed it from "John Briggs" in order to conceal the humble origins he shares

with Tom. He had hoped "it would hide him from the ridicule . . . of Thurnall, whom he dreaded meeting every time he walked the London streets, and who was for years . . . his *bête noir*, his Frankenstein's familiar" (178). On the rock, Tom reveals that, although he and Elsley have been separated for decades, he remembers Elsley's real name: "'Sir!' [Elsley cried] and then stopped suddenly; for his feet slipped upon the polished stone, and on his face he fell into the pool at Thurnall's feet" (159). Elsley's spasmodic collapse is a moment of recognition: the two men have the same origins, they are just Tom and John. The moment this intimacy is made explicit, it is violently undercut. Elsley falls at Tom's feet, face-down. Elsley's fall echoes through the book: at the end, he again falls on a slippery rock, and this time he slips into the laudanum-induced stupor that ends his life.

At a pivotal point near the end of the novel, Elsley becomes estranged from his long-suffering wife over a flower. Growing at the bottom of a ravine, the globe flower attracts Mrs. Vavasour, who spends most of her unpoetic life indoors worrying over finances and children. While her practical, frugal nature infuriates passionate, lazy Elsley most of the time, he ignores her fanciful plea for the flower as a corsage because of the danger involved: "Really, my dear, all men are not knight errants enough to endanger their necks for a bit of weed" (355). Elsley's poetic sensibilities lapse when challenged by physical danger—and, it seems, with good reason. He has the luck of a Sydney Dobell when it comes to staying upright. In the end, an old suitor of his wife's, now a successful Army Major, "swung himself easily enough down the ledge; got the flower, and put it, quietly bowing, into Mrs. Vavasour's hand" (356). Enraged by erroneous suspicions of his wife's infidelity, Elsley

abandons her and their children and falls instead into a drug addiction that quickly ends his life. His jealousy, however, seems only nominally related to his wife, for whom he has no very strong feelings. He is envious instead of the Major's easy physical grace, his ability, like Tom's, to control the physical world rather than being at its mercy.

Reunited with his wife on his deathbed, Elsley spends his last words renouncing poetry: ". . . you will go home and burn all the poetry—all the manuscripts, and never let the children write a verse—a verse—when I am dead?" (439). The failure of the Spasmodic poet structurally guarantees Tom's happy ending; the story is a charting of the rise of one while the other falls. Elsley's literary success in London coincides with Tom's hard labor in the colonies: his descent from celebrity to drug-addiction underwrites the making of Tom's fortune and marriage. The novel—even, at certain points, the narration—cannot exist without the two men side by side. The loving, familial relationship they strike up at the end reinforces their closeness: Tom rescues Elsley from the slums, tends his bedside, and gives him a home; in turn, Elsley "began to cling to [Tom] like a child" (423). After Elsley's death, Tom meditates: "I have seen men enough die . . . I have seen men drowned, shot, hanged, run over, and worse deaths than that, Sir, too;—and, somehow, I never felt any man's death like that man's" (440). The same mechanism that keeps Tom and Elsley apart also draws them together as necessary complementary agents in the production of masculinity. In this way, Tom and Elsley's troubled relationship echoes the ones critics pose between Spasmodic poets and "good" poets. In both cases, masculinity emanates from the relational dynamic between the two only to the extent

that the Spasmodic is effeminate. And it is because of this rejection of masculinity that the Spasmodic poet, as in Elsley's case, is able to write with an abandon that is at once pleasurable and shameful.

The layering of the lyric over the narrative that Elsley achieves when he takes the narrator's place suggests that the lyric and the narrative impulse are not so distinct as Tom or the narrator would have it. In the first chapter, "Poetry and Prose," Elsley is introduced as the debased former, while Tom is the commonsensical latter; the novel goes on to investigate the problematic relationship between the lyric and the narrative through an opposition of the effete and the manly. Nevertheless, it is structurally imperative that these binaries collapse, just as Tom and Elsley collapse into an affectionate relationship at the moment of Elsley's death. Although Elsley fails as a man, he is structurally necessary to the novel's production of masculinity because he embodies its opposite and speaks at the moment of its limitation. Tom is able to define his masculinity in counterpoint to Elsley's effeminacy, while Elsley's complicity with the narrator highlights the limitations of masculine writerly authority. In this way, Elsley is at the heart of and completely exiled from the novel's definition of masculinity. The Spasmodic poet speaks from this outlaw position that is nonetheless only visible in relation to canonical masculinities.

A Life-Drama: Masochism and Language

If *Two Years Ago* exorcises the effete Spasmodic poet from literature and social life, while reinscribing the pleasure of his textual abandon along the way, *A Life-Drama* is the embrace of that abandon. After one of Vavasour's falls on a patch

of slippery rock, Tom prescribes him dumbbells and directs him to get more exercise. Tom, like Victorian avatars of masculinity in the second part of the century, values physical activity. For Kingsley, mental stability depended on physical exercise. The mind of a person who does not care for physical activity "may be very active; it may be very quick at catching at new and grand ideas—all the more quick, perhaps, on account of its own secret malaise and self-discontent: but it will be irritable, *spasmodic*, hysterical . . ." (Kingsley, *Health and Education* 18, emphasis added). Medical science also highlighted the healthy and mentally stabilizing affects of sports, while popular books like Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* celebrated the formative masculine space of the school playing field. As Bruce Haley in *The Healthy Body in Victorian Culture* and J.A. Mangan in *The Games Ethic and Imperialism* and *Manliness and Morality: Middle Class Masculinity in Britain and America 1800-1940* point out, state-sponsored physical fitness became the arena in which invigorating masculine pleasure could be freely expressed.

To exercise is to assume control over the body in a linear narrative of development and mastery. The Spasmodics, as I have argued, were neither linear nor in control of their bodies. Victorian medical discourses emphasized the ways that nervous dysfunctions attacked the muscle tone and central balance of the body: the spasmodic body was by definition out of shape, even shapeless. Elsley, for example, suffers from "dyspepsia, brought on by his effeminacy" (128). At the same time as physical exercise became a manly virtue, Victorian medical science began to focus on the sphincter as a point of particular concern for the nervous patient.[5] Numerous

[5] See Chapter Two for a discussion of Marshall Hall's *Memoirs of the Nervous System* in which he explores the existence of a secondary nervous system that controls "the orifices, the sphincters, the

experiments were conducted in which the sphincters of decapitated horses, turtles and other animals were probed before and after the removal of nervous centers. Only when the animals became nerveless in addition to headless did their sphincters relax. Spasmodic patients could be expected to lose control of their sphincters, their muscles and their balance, just as Spasmodic poets could be expected to lose control of narrative impetus. Abandon and release characterized spasmodic bodies and Spasmodic poems.

Nevertheless, the rhetoric of pleasure surrounding willed physical activity was also available to the Spasmodics, although only in a negative sense in which health was perverted into disease and masculine activity emerged as feminized passivity. The beats and rhythms of Spasmodic poetry, as well as the "excessive" fervor of their emotional peaks, must have been experienced as pleasurable by their contemporary audiences, or why would they have been so popular before they became so very, very unpopular? Spasmodic relaxation of strict self-control, especially when read side by side with the rhetorics of self-discipline that characterized Victorian masculinity, encodes the pleasure of abandonment.

A Life-Drama is the story of Walter, an aspiring poet, and his ascent from obscurity and madness to fame and sanity. However, this predictable, linear plot has very little to do with the experience of reading *A Life-Drama*. The real emotional investment is in Walter's intense longing for poetic success, a longing that he expresses through repetitive metaphors in which he genders himself female. These are the first seven lines of the poem:

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organs of ingestion and repulsions, [and] of secretion . . ." (94). For Hall, control over the sphincter marked the integrity of this secondary nervous system.

As a wild maiden, with love-drinking eyes,
Sees in sweet dreams a beaming Youth of Glory,
And wakes to weep, and ever after sighs
For that bright vision till her hair is hoary;
Even so, alas! Is my life's passion story.
For Poesy my heart and pulses beat,
For poesy my blood runs red and fleet . . . (5)

Gendered images of erotic longing continue:

Poesy! Poesy! I'd give to thee,
As passionately, my rich-laden years,
My bubble pleasures, and my awful joys
As Hero gave her trembling sighs to find
Delicious death on sweet Leander's lip. (6)
. . . .
As well may some maiden waste her love
Upon the cold front of some marble Jove.
I cannot draw regard of thy great eyes.
I love thee, Poesy! Thou art a rock;
I, a weak wave, would break on thee and die! (6)

Throughout, Walter presents Poetry as a materially solid idea—a rock, a marble Jove—upon which he directs his energies only to have them dissolve away, like the earth under Dobell's feet: "beaten, and foiled, and shamed, / The arrow of my soul which I had shot / To bring down Fame, dissolved like shaft of mist" (8). A weak

wave, a shaft of mist, Walter also dissolves out of a system of gender identification. This ardent abdication of agency approaches masochism in its intensity; like masochism, it is experienced as erotically enjoyable: "I'd rather be the glad, bright-leaping foam, / Than the smooth sluggish sea. O let me live / To love and flush and thrill—or let me die" (*A Life-Drama* 89). Adams argues in *Dandies and Desert Saints* that masculine self-discipline could become a masochistic pleasure:

> If the true man punishes himself, then the science of renunciation operates constantly on the verge of its own dissolution . . . manhood . . . might fail, not so much through a *lapse* of self-discipline, as through the *intensification* of self-discipline to the point that it becomes eroticized as masochism, and thus becomes a form of 'savage' abandon. (112)

In Victorian logics of masculinity, the masochism of intense self-discipline and the s/Spasmodic surrender to poetic throes sometimes meet in an eroticized, material, half-shameful pleasure. It is at such moments that Elsley takes over the narrative of *Two Years Ago* and that Walter "waste[s] 'her' love" upon "Poesy." Kingsley and the Spasmodics emerge here as strange bedfellows, participators in a common system of desire. Ascetic self-discipline approaches erotic recklessness in the opposite direction from Spasmodic disintegration, but their sensual similarity suggests a kind of pleasure in abandon that can only exist at the far side of Victorian masculinity.

By the end of the poem, however, Walter begins to cast himself in a far less masochistic role. Adopting a Kingsleyan language of duty and athleticism, he finally begins work on what will become his master poem:

Why work I not? The veriest mote that sports
Its one-day life within the sunny beam
Has its stern duties. Wherfore have I none?
I will throw off this dead and useless past,
As a strong runner, straining for his life,
Unclasps a mantle to the hungry winds.
A mighty purpose rises large and slow
From out the fluctuations of my soul,
. . .
I have a heart to dare,
And spirit-hews to work my daring out;
I'll cleave the world as a swimmer cleaves the sea,
Breaking the sleek green billows into froth,
With tilting full-blown chest . . . (141)

In a passage quoted earlier, Walter surrenders to the urge to write poetry "As Hero gave her trembling sighs to find / Delicious death on sweet Leander's lip" (6). Now Walter transforms himself into Buckley's manly Byron, successfully cleaving the sea with his (textual) body after Leander's example.

At the very end of the poem, Walter gives a blueprint for the rest of his life: "I will go forth 'mong men, not mailed in scorn, / But in the armor of pure intent./ Great duties are before me and great songs," (159). Kingsley would have been pleased: Walter implicitly promises to write poetry that would help England "fight the despots." His military metaphors suggest an entirely new poetics, based on strength

and domination. Of course, the poem ends at this point, foreclosing the possibility of realizing this masculine verse. For the Spasmodics, it can't exist.

Gender, Self, and Poetic Language: *Maud* and Wartime Masculinity

Walter's turn from solipsistic longing to military metaphors evokes another, more famous poem that was occasionally labeled "Spasmodic": Tennyson's *Maud.* Several early reviews of *Maud* establish it as Spasmodic in its intensity and subjectivity. This tradition of locating Tennyson's work alongside the Spasmodics's work is seen into the twentieth century, with articles such as Joseph Collins's 1973 "Tennyson and the Spasmodics," and in the work of Antony Harrison (discussed later in this section). For *Maud*'s contemporary reviewers, that poem is too frenzied in tone, too "unnatural" in its emotional extremity. Oliphant's reaction in an 1856 review of new poetry is representative. Lumping Tennyson with Sydney Dobell, she "would crave to know what right these gentlemen may have to seize upon our genial nature, and craze her healthful looks and voices to their hysterical and ghastly fancy!" (132). She finds Tennyson's "force of expression" in *Maud* to be nothing but a "juggle of misplaced adjectives" (132, see also my Chapter One).

Spasmodic in its language and tone, *Maud* also emerges as historically and thematically Spasmodic. Oliphant imagines a trio of *Maud*'s speaker, Balder, and Alexander Smith, all direct descendants of Byron:

> He[*Maud*'s speaker] has no name, this ill-fated youth; but doubtless Balder is reckoned in his roll of cousinships, and so is Mr. Alexander Smith. There are three of them, ladies and gentlemen, and they are an

> amiable trio. Strangely as their garb and intentions are altered, there is a lingering reminiscence about them of a certain *Childe Harold* who once set the world aflame. (132)

Damned by their lineage, Tennyson, Dobell and Smith are here frothy imitations of Byron. Where Kingsley and Buckley claim that these poets are effete shadows of Byron, for Oliphant they are absurd to the extent that they assume Byronism. Differing critical interpretations of Byron's influence on the Spasmodics and Tennyson emphasize the extent to which questions of gender and poetic authority preoccupied mid-Victorian literary criticism. On the one hand, Kingsley's Byron was celebrated for the masculinity of his body and historic war-time activities, and by extension his verse. On the other hand, Oliphant's Byron, elided with his own creation—Childe Harold—introduced a flawed note of solipsistic self-regard and isolation from society into the history of poetics, a note that re-surfaced with the Spasmodics and Tennyson. The multipicity of Byron's roles suggests that the categories of "masculinity," "poetic identity," and "self" were charged with conflicting interests and social significance, highlighted by the Crimean War.

If the Spasmodics stayed down the side-alley of Byronic egotism, Oliphant argues that Tennyson managed to find his way back to more acceptable verse because he, unlike the Spasmodics and Byron in *Childe Harold*, refused to directly glorify the role of "poet." The redemptive difference, for Oliphant, between the Spasmodics proper and Tennyson is that *Maud* stops short of completely idolizing isolated poetic genius, and thus the most extreme of all egotisms. Note how, in the following

configuration, the blood relation between the *Maud* and the work of Smith and Dobell peters out into a system of competition and failure:

> Mr. Tennyson, however, has insight and perception to keep him from the strand on which his imitators—the smaller people who endeavor to compete with him in poetry, and triumphantly excel him in extravagance—go ashore. *He* knows that a poet's hero ought not to be a poet—that a man's genius was given him . . . not for the pitiful delight of self-laudation, meanest of human follies. (133)

Over a hundred years and thirty later, Antony Harrison returns to the same complaint of egotism in order to explain *Maud*'s intersection with Spasmodicism. In *Victorian Poets and Romantic Poems: Intertextuality and Ideology*, Harrison addresses Victorian poets' self-conscious use of Romantic poems in order to differentiate their own work and articulate a shifting world view. For him, *Maud* is "a parodic confrontation with Spasmodic poetry, many general elements of which were present in [Tennyson's] own early work and derived from a common Keatsian and Byronic literary heritage" (72). That is, Tennyson consciously includes the Romantic elements of Spasmodic poetry in *Maud* to deflect and deflate Spasmodic poetics. Harrison writes that *Maud* "sets out to subvert Spasmodicism and reaffirm the (post-Romantic) originality of Tennyson's own work." (73)

Harrison describes earlier efforts to differentiate the Laureate from the likes of Smith and Dobell as "attempts to immunize Tennyson from the Spasmodic contagion" (71). His own discussion of *Maud* also derives from this perspective, in which the Spasmodics carry the disease of bad poetry and bad reputations, while

canonical work like Tennyson's must be de-loused and quarantined. Harrison's theory is that *Maud* operates between authoritative pre-texts: *Hamlet*, and the Spasmodic work of Balder and Smith. In the end, *Maud* stands as a testament to " . . . Tennyson's ability to use elements of the best as well as the worst literature available to him in order to create a monodrama whose power lies precisely in its ideological indeterminacy" (71). Freezing *Hamlet* in position as "the best" and Spasmodicism as "the worst" of literature, Harrison recapitulates Oliphant's claim that the Spasmodics stood in stark contrast to Shakespeare, that "prince of English poets," who wrote with "as much simplicity and as little egotism as any laboring peasant of his time" (Oliphant 127).

Quoting Balder's desire to become "King of men, and on the inform /And perishable substance of the Time / Beget a better world," Harrison notes that *Maud* ultimately departs from such egotism by sending its "hero" off to war in the final section. Harrison concludes that "[i]n the end Maud's speaker clearly repudiates the cult of self that Balder flamboyantly indulges. He does so in favor of a larger cause. Thus in Maud the critique of self-interest as the driving force in a corrupt society becomes, as well, an attack upon Spasmodicism . . ." (88).

Harrison's reading of *Maud*, like Oliphant's, draws attention to Spasmodic egotism in order to "immunize" Tennyson, who ultimately refuses to glorify solipsism, the from these lesser poets. While agreeing with Harrison's larger project of reading Victorian poems in the light of inherited Romantic ideologies, I would argue, however, that Tennyson should be placed less in opposition to the Spasmodics and more as a sharer in the debates over gender and the identity of the poet that

marked mid-Victorian verse and the Spasmodics in particular. Joseph Bristow's "Nation, Class, and Gender: Tennyson's *Maud* and War" (1990) is useful in this context. Bristow's thesis that *Maud* "voice[s] a particular set of mid-Victorian anxieties about competing versions of masculinity in the testing climate of the Crimean War," compounded by the tensions between poethood and masculinity/ies, allows a reading of *Maud* that speaks to the concern about gender and poetics that I have been tracing in *A Life-Drama* and *Two Years Ago* (93).

Bristow argues that poetry, for Victorians facing the Crimean War, "could lend urgency as well as dignity to the battle cries leading the British army forward" (104). Mid-nineteenth-century essays such as Aytoun's "Poetry of the War Reviewed Before Sebastopol" (*Blackwood's* 1855), in which the author examines war sonnets by Smith, Dobell, and others for their ability to inspire soldiers and raise national spirits, suggest that Spasmodic verse is clearly out of tune with the war-drums. Aytoun makes this clear when he dismisses a slender volume of war poetry by Smith and Dobell with "Down, Balder, down! I am not in the humour for foolery" (534). Bristow, although he does not mention Aytoun's review, addresses the problems subjective, emotionally volatile poetry such as *Maud* posed for the emergent ideal of war-time verse. As Victorians poetics distanced itself from "the spontaneous overflow of conspicuously male genius from the earlier Romantic period" and ushered in the "increasing identification of the poet with femininity, particularly with feebleness of mind," poems like *Maud*, *A Life-Drama*, and even *Empedocles on Etna* were all caught in the resulting conflict over the gender identity of the poet (93, 104). With weak, effeminate "heroes" and solipsistic rather than patriotic lyric intensity,

none of these poems were quite an endorsement either of masculine warrior nature or national projects of war.

It should also be noted that this gender confusion intersected with issues of class. Bristow notes that *Maud* is marked by two differently-classed men: Maud's aristocratic yet poor lover, and her newly wealthy but boorish brother. The Spasmodics were similarly torn between classes, as their working-class backgrounds marked them as different from Tennyson or Byron. Meanwhile, economics was a real concern in their poetry. *A Life-Drama*'s effeminate hero Walter, for example, settles into a role of masculine vigor only after he has published a wildly successful poem. The hero of *Gerald*, discussed in the following chapter, suffers great anxiety over the conflict of interests between the marketplace and the sanctity of his verse. He dies of a heart-sickness brought on in the moments of his most extreme poverty, but only after he too has become an economic success and reconciled himself to the manly virtues of the country (which, in the poem, are opposed to the enervating environment of the city, where he first falls ill—see Chapter Four). For the Spasmodics, masculinity seems directly linked with economic success, whereas in *Maud* the speaker vacillates between scorn for materialist society and a desire to fight a war on behalf of that society. Although a detailed analysis of Spasmodic class is beyond the scope of this project, class clearly worked with and against gender identification to influence the ways Victorians understood the role of the poet.

Maud, Bristow argues, eventually carves out a compromise between the femininity of emotion and the masculine virtues of action when the speaker descends into madness, kills Maud's brother, and, finally, goes off to fight for England:

"Tennyson draws together the potentially emasculated mode of poetry—the "feminine" world of feeling—with the spirit of heroic military ambition under the banner of irrational passion" (106). That is, in *Maud*, in order to gain a right to the title of valiant and dominant masculinity, the speaker must give way to maddened passion. In order to become "masculine," the speaker must fully indulge his "feminine" capacity for irrational emotion to its illogical extreme. The only path to masculinity is madness. As Bristow puts it, "[a]ll in all, the poem's hero has to become more than a woman (maddened) to save himself from becoming less than a man (effeminate)" (108).

Similarly, Walter vacillates between modes of "feminine" lyric longing and masculine ambition. Throughout *A Life-Drama*, Walter operates between two models of masculinity: the duty-driven athletic model he eventually embraces, and the model of Keatsian longing with which he begins the poem. These models are embodied by two male figures in the poem: an unnamed but obviously Keatsian poet-friend of Walter's who has died before the poem begins and to whom Walter dedicates all his poetic endeavor, and Edward, a prosaic Englishman who advises Walter to "watch well thy heart! / It is, methinks, an eager shaking star / Not a calm steady planet" (84). Walter mourns for his poet-friend in physically-invested language: "He was the sun, I was that squab—the earth, / And basked me in his light until he drew / Flowers from my barren sides. O! he was rich, / And I rejoiced upon his shore of pearls, / A weak enamored sea" (24). However, he spends a great deal of his time with Edward, who is confident that matrimony will "lead him back / To happiness and God" (149).

Because the poem ends with Walter's acceptance of Edward's advice, it is tempting to read *A Life-Drama* as a linear *Bildungsroman* in which an affectionate boy grows up into a successful man (or, to put it more strongly, a young poet goes from gendering himself female to gendering himself male), but the texture of the poem forecloses such a simple reading. By definition, Spasmodic poems trouble narrative. *A Life-Drama* is temporally and generically complex: for example, at one point Walter tells a long narrative verse story in which the main character tells a long narrative verse story in which she (the main character is a princess) pauses often to sing lyrics. The frequent lyric interludes and narrative layers complicate the forward momentum of the plot, suggesting a horizontal poetics of sensual rhythm rather than a vertical poetics of event. This very Spasmodic style makes it difficult to invest the ending of the poem with any moral weight. Although Walter ends the poem by taking a wife who will structurally guarantee his gender position and dominance, such an overdetermined conclusion just doesn't seem to fit. In a poem marked by fragmentation, what is there to conclude? For these reasons, Smith's refusal of gender determinacy in the form of Walter's wavering between models of masculinity stands out. *A Life-Drama*, suspending Walter between these two models, suggests that gender is provisional and constructed. In this sense, Smith's poem participates in the same complex gender shifts and layerings that mark Tennyson's *Maud*. In fact, it seems that anxiety over gender and authorship is a large part of what Harrison calls "the Spasmodic contagion" from which "healthier" poems must be isolated.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* was, along with *Maud*, often labeled Spasmodic. There are obvious reasons for such an accusation: like most

Spasmodic poems, *Aurora Leigh* bore the name of its poet-protagonist. As in the case of Walter and Gerald, Aurora Leigh self-consciously styled herself a poet. The scene in which Aurora crowns herself with laurel suggests a Spasmodic investment in poetic achievement, although when she is caught by Romney "with a mouth / Twice graver than his eyes," she is quicker than Spasmodic poet-heroes to recognize the absurdity of her situation (Book II 58-59). Like those men, however, Aurora defends her vocation and searches for a way to reconcile her art with the social realities in which she is enveloped; unlike them, she largely succeeds. The sexual frankness of *Aurora Leigh* also echoes the sensuousness of Spasmodic poems; although in Barrett's composition, Marian's plight and Aurora's romantic feelings for Romney are both overtly negotiated in terms of class and social conflict.

Immediately linked with the Spasmodics through reviews like Aytoun's 1857 essay for *Blackwood's* that described it as "fantastic, unnatural, exaggerated" (32), *Aurora Leigh* was similarly criticized for its participation in the egotism that marked the Spasmodics. In his review of *Aurora Leigh*, Aytoun associates Elizabeth Barrett Browning with the "new poets," who

> Come upon their imaginary stage, tearing their hair and proclaiming their inward wretchedness, and sprouting sorrier metaphysics in still sorrier verse, for no imaginable reason whatever. . . . They think the public will be content to receive their crude thoughts as genuine notes of issue from the Bank of Genius, if so be that they are dressed up in a gaudy, glittering and hyperbolic form; and they ransack, not only earth and sea, but heaven itself for ornaments. All this while they forget that

> there is no meaning in their talk; that people who are desirous to hear a story, do not call the minstrel in for the purpose of listening to his [sic] disappointed aspirations, or the bleatings of his [sic] individual woes . . . (40-41)

As Kerry McSweeny points out in the Introduction to the Oxford Classics edition of *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora's "subjectivity is predominant throughout the poem" (xxv). For Aytoun, the main symptom of indulgence in solipsistic indulgence is linguistic "ornamentation," which he finds in Barrett Browning's poem as well as in Spasmodic verse. McSweeny recognizes that Aurora's compositional strategy—"Trust the spirit, / . . . to make the form; / For otherwise we only imprison spirit / And not embody"—is distinctly Spasmodic (Book V 223-226). Aytoun's accusations, however, strike a discordant note when he mentions the "hyperbolic" language Barrett Browning shares with the Spasmodics. Although *Aurora Leigh* occasionally includes "stylistic excesses," most of the language of the poem is not so much "gaudy" or "glittering," but prosaic and even conversational, especially when read side-by-side with the Spasmodics (McSweeny xxiii). McSweeny notes that "a great deal of the blank verse of *Aurora Leigh* is distinctly prosy and only nominally metrical" (xxiv).

Perhaps the reason for this discrepancy is that Aytoun saw in *Aurora Leigh* an opportunity to deliver his familiar declamation against Spasmodic versification. Certainly he believed that Spasmodic attention to language over plot was not only a literary danger, but also a social danger against which a firm stance must be taken. In his review, Aytoun refuses to call *Aurora Leigh* narrative, as a great deal of it is devoted to thoughts rather than actions. He refers to this lopsided care for interiority

as "a symptom of literary decadence . . . [t]he same tendency is observable in the later literature of Greece and Rome" (40). The enervation of poetry and culture is here blamed on Spasmodic tastes, which also appear in *Aurora Leigh*. The problem, again, is in an alleged valuation of "feminine" expression over "masculine" action—a flawed dichotomy that leads to the effeminacy of civilization. Despite the fact that *Aurora Leigh* was written by a woman—and, for that matter, a woman who was often accused of a lack of feminine delicacy in the authorship of *Aurora Leigh*—and despite the fact that Browning's vision of the poet in that poem ultimately celebrates social consciousness, Aytoun was able to read it as a dire warning against cultural decline and the emasculation of society. In fact, in the passage above, he genders Elizabeth Barrett Browning male in order to read her poem alongside Spasmodic verse, as a sign of cultural effeminacy.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler examines the ways language and expression work to constitute gender. Similarly, in Aytoun's reading of *Aurora Leigh* above, the alleged egotism of the speaker is conflated with the author's allegedly overdone concern for language. The marriage of attention to self and attention to language threatens, in the literary receptions of *Aurora Leigh*, the poems of the Spasmodics, and *Maud*, to emasculate the author, the role of the poet, and society itself. Developing the premise that gender is always belated, never natural, Butler writes: "Consider the further consequence that if gender is something one becomes—but can never be—then gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity . . .. If gender is not tied to sex, either causally or expressively, then gender is a kind of action that can potentially proliferate beyond the binary limits imposed by the apparent binary of

sex" (*Gender Trouble* 143). *A Life-Drama* performs a proliferation of this sort, allowing Walter to suspend almost indefinitely his gender identification. Moreover, the critical reception of *A Life-Drama* and *Maud* demonstrate the extent to which gender appears as a "kind of becoming or activity." The gender identification of the poet (both the historical poet and the poet in the poem) is contingent upon the ways these poems work to create viable visions of masculinity.

Interestingly, it is at the moment of gender calcification that Walter becomes mute. The poem ends because throughout it has linked the production of verse to the production of gender: Walter's self-genderings shift as his relationship to poetry shifts. He becomes gendered as he becomes a poet: once gender has become solidified, the poetry stops. Butler, in imagining the consequences of gender as a becoming, notes the need for "a new vocabulary that institutes and proliferates present participles of various kinds, resignifiable and expansive categories that resist both the binary and substantializing grammatical restrictions on gender." *A Life-Drama* certainly doesn't achieve such a vocabulary; Smith's work may be a poetic play on available and shifting genderings, but it is not a political act in the social real, as Butler imagines her new vocabulary must be. This vocabulary is probably, as Butler recognizes, another feminist utopian fantasy. But I quote the section to point out that when Butler (following Foucault) wants to reimagine gender as a fluid category, she turns her attention to language, vocabularies and grammars. As I argued in Chapter One, language and textuality were central concerns of Spasmodic poems. A great deal of the poetry in *A Life-Drama* is not directly received by the reader; the secondary nature of language is highlighted as Walter hardly ever gives monologues,

but reads from poems he is in the process of drafting. Layers of language also exist alongside the indeterminacy of gender here. It is through his relationship to language, to the poetry that he attempts to produce, that Walter's shifting gender identities are produced. When he casts himself as a woman in the metaphors at the beginning of the poem, he is adopting a provisional gender in relationship to "Poesy" and to the degree that he finds himself impotent to write it. Although he occupies the other pole of the gender binary at the end (he "masters" writing), his gender position is underwritten by the same relational mechanism.

Smith treats overt attention to language and language construction not, as Kingsley would have it, as a barrier or ungainly film in the way of true identity, but as the medium through which identity, gender and knowledge are always produced. In this, he, like Elsley, is guilty of turning to language over action. Victorian poets were in a double-bind: writers, they must not draw undue attention to language. In *The Finer Optic*, Carol Christ explains that the Victorians were increasingly burdened by a growing conviction of the isolating subjectivity of all experience. This conviction led to a poetics that emphasized the particular over the universal, solipsism over objectivity. At the same time, however, Victorian critics, audiences and writers were still morally attracted to the inherited ideal of objectivity in verse. Gerald Massey's 1858 review of Spasmodic poetry from *The North British Review* is representative. In "The Spasmodic Poets," Massey argues "For not only is the poet a translator of the inner life of man, with its wonder world of thoughts and feelings . . . but he also translates into his poetry, and reflects for us the very spirit of his time" (reprinted in *Graham's Monthly Magazine of Literature, Art and Fashion* 399).

The greatest poets, Massey argues, are the most transparent. Of Chaucer, he marvels: "With what crystal clearness his poetry, in its simple heart-home directness and passionate sincerity . . ., images the freshness and sweetness of the morning time, and the lustihood of young life that was then filling England" (399). Massey continues in this strain, applauding Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth for similar "crystal clearness." "For," he explains "the poet is a medium; and the most perfect condition for conveying the truest image of things, is that in which the self is lost in a larger life, and all the spiritual pores are open portals for this larger life of the aggregate humanity" (400). The poet here is the transparent gateway to a wider understanding of humanity and nature. His genius resides in his ability to reflect with seeming effortlessness a well-ordered and coherent vision of human experience. An ideal poet could bear the weight of the world by exhibiting control over it, bringing it together and showing it as more organized and cohesive than many Victorians were beginning to suspect it could be. By drawing attention to language, the Spasmodics draw attention to the world as fragmented and constructed; they darken the mirror poets were supposed to hold to the world. They present the universe not as completed or received but as particular and shifting. For the Spasmodics, representing the world meant representing its constructedness in language. Their verse, above all things, is about the production of verse.

The Spasmodic poets were also intent on recording individual introspection rather than universal feelings. They drew attention to themselves as poets by dwelling in verse on the production of verse. In this way, they again marred the reflective surface of poetry with their own image. For Victorian audiences, this twin attention

to language and self was experienced as dangerously chaotic. As Massey puts it: "Tennyson's is the last song that rises up calmly, and rings out clearly with its melodious beauty, in spite of the pressure of our complex time, and the stress of its adverse influences. After him, comes the deluge let loose by what has been called the 'Spasmodic School.'" (401).

Great poets, for Massey, are able to reassemble the world without showing any seams: they are able to write about even the greatest passion or sorrow with clarity and calm. The Spasmodics display no such mastery: "The out-flowing tides of feeling are checked and forced back upon the [Spasmodic] poet, so that he feels compelled to turn his eyes within in self-analysis, until, instead of living, he gets bewildered at the mystery of life, which he cannot solve, and dazzled with the new knowledge, which he cannot assimilate." Spasmodic poets lack access to universal feeling: they dwell too much on themselves. In this analysis, there is no room for the pleasure of the deluge, as it is experienced by Elsley in his mountaintop storms and Walter in his exuberant longing. Rather, spasmodic investment in the "dazzle" of language and particular experience is rendered a sign of physical weakness, a lack of masculine prowess:

> Here [in *Festus*, which Massey takes as the Spasmodic prototype]we shall find none of the suspended, poising strength, as of the mountainous repose which marks the climacteric expression of the highest powers in the world of mind, even as they are also the grandest expression of power in our physical world; for these can only be attained by the creative mind, that under the dominant idea moves with

> all its powers at once, each keeping proper place and perfect time, harmoniously to one great end. It is thus the great poets work; and we perceive that they accomplish their great ends with such a repose of power, that, like the best generals, they appear to have won the battle, and only to have brought half their forces into the field.

Massey, like Buckley in his comparison of Dobell and Byron, identifies poetic force with physical achievement. Like generals, great poets are capable of ordering and deploying. The Spasmodics, who are disorganized and who make no virtue of self control, become weak and effeminate. Massey further describes them as "bourne, and hurried, and whirled away in a wild confusion"; they are at the mercy of their poetry rather than in command of it.

The adjective "spasmodic" again becomes important here. If poets and generals were successful to the extent that they were able to exhibit control and objectivity, the particular, eccentric pathology of the spasm dismisses the Spasmodics entirely from categories of sound writing and masculine power. Massey unsurprisingly finds the name "spasmodic" quite appropriate: "We fancy there is more meaning and applicability in the name of "Spasmodic," given to so much of the poetry which has been produced of late years, than the first givers of the name saw in it. . . . For what constitutes spasm, but weakness trying to be strong, and collapsing in the effort?" Spasmodics collapse, the world is too much for them: just as the ground beneath Dobell's feet fell away, they are pulled under by experience because they do not create a system of organization that will contain it. For the Victorians, this was a moral failing that kept the Spasmodics outside of most standard definitions of

masculinity at the same time as it rendered their poetry unfit. The collapsing Spasmodics, like Buckley's collapsing ground, signify an abdication of masculinity and a poetics of the body weak.

Furthermore, spasms, because they evoke the particularity of disease rather than the universality of health, and the surrender of self-control rather than its triumph, become the perfect label for poets who "prob[e] among the secrets of the skeleton which lies hidden beneath the rosy bloom of flesh, with speculations on bones and membranes, cells and blood-vessels. Oyster-like . . . get their *pearls* from a state of disease" (Massey 403). The Spasmodic abdication of objectivity in favor of fragmentation plays out in physical terms, in their anatomical probing among microscopic cells and morbid membranes. Their "*pearls*," or striking images and metaphors, invoke flawed physicality, just as Buckley's neo-Victorian comparison of Dobell and Byron makes visible the bodies of the two men. For the Victorians, a way of neutralizing the textual and historical disturbance of these flawed, weak, disabled bodies was to inscribe them as effeminate. Discourses about the masculine virtue of self-control, the historical need for unrelenting physical strength in the Crimea, and contemporary literary concern for the textual illusion of objective mastery, all intersected to create the environment in which Spasmodic poetry could be characterized as effeminate. In comparison with "manly" poets such as Chaucer or Shakespeare, or "manly" characters such as Tom, the Spasmodics therefore became absurd, ineffectual and practically handicapped by their relative effeminacy. Nevertheless, this provided for the Spasmodics a position from which they could begin to explore the poetic erotics of self-abandonment that haunt the edges of

traditional Victorian masculinities, as well as the pleasures of textual fragmentation and gender indeterminacy.

Chapter Four
Spasms and Sensations: Sensation Fiction and Spasmodic Responses to Modernity

"A slight nervous contraction": Spasms and Sensation Fiction

One other Victorian sub-genre bears a great deal of resemblance to and shares the burden of contemporary critical skepticism with the Spasmodic poem: the sensation novel. Both were popularly consumed, yet critically maligned; both seemed to their contemporary critics suspiciously immoral. Whatever the generic difference between the two literary phenomena, the terms "sensation" and "spasmodic" are immediately linked by their mutual suggestion of bodies and nerves. Moreover, both had become pejorative literary terms by the second half of the nineteenth century.

First, some background about the nineteenth-century medical and literary evolution of the term "sensation." This contextualization will demonstrate that "sensation" and "spasmodic" follow a similar nineteenth-century trajectory: from philosophic and medical terminology to literary criticism. While "sensation" has been in use for centuries as a term describing physical feeling, increasing nineteenth-century interest in biology as a way of explaining human consciousness caused the term to be drawn upon as a fundamental factor of being, health and sanity. When James Mill set out to describe the biological basis of consciousness in 1829 (as described in Chapter Two), he began by describing a crucial "flow" of sensation: "In all these cases, what we speak of is a point of consciousness, a thing which we can describe no otherwise than by calling it a feeling; a part of that series, that succession, that flow of something, on account of which we call ourselves living or sensitive

creatures" (*Analysis* 7). For Mill, there is not a basic building block of consciousness so much as a basic stream, a rich protean river of feeling out of which higher brain functions like abstract thinking and language eventually rise. Mill argues that our ideas are not derived from objects, but from sensations: "thus, our ideas spring up, or exist, in the order in which the sensations existed, of which they are the copies" (56). Sensations order human experience; to the extent that we feel them, we are human. Later, in 1859, Alexander Bain argued that sensation was a primary, simple state of perception necessary for the development of emotion. Sensations repeated over time and connected with an object become emotion (*The Emotions and the Will* 69). For both of these medical writers, as for many scientists today, sensation was a *sine qua non* of experience, one of the initial ways the body becomes aware of itself. Although earlier scientists considered sensation a fundamental aspect of consciousness, Bain and Mill's usage emphasizes the ways in which physically expressed feeling and corporeal experience were increasingly central to Victorian ideas of being.

Against this definition of "sensation" as a constant stream of physical perception, another meaning became particularly pertinent for the Victorians. If a smooth stream of sensation contributed to the normative, healthy consciousness, then rude interruptions of this stream signified the opposite: disrupted nerves and questionable mental health. "Spasm," like "sensation" also could be used to mean "an excited or violent feeling" (OED). In the nineteenth century, the popular sense of the word "sensation" increasingly became a hyperbole of itself: in addition to signifying a sensory perception, "sensation," like "spasm," was used to mean a very strong, even an overpowering, interruption of normative consciousness. The Victorian

usage of "sensation" in this way is nowhere more obvious than in literary criticism, where "sensation fiction" meant fiction particularly capable of physically shocking the reader. The nineteenth-century literary use of the term "sensation," then, is similar to the nineteenth-century logic of the spasm—both indicated violent emotion that is physically experienced and expressed, and both suggested a temporally located burst of nerves that disrupts a healthy consciousness. Both also indicate an interruption of that "flow of something"—consciousness, lyricism, plot—that composed mental and literary efforts.

It is in this sense of shocking disruption that Dickens used the word in Chapter 38 of *Bleak House*, when Mr. Guppy is on the cusp of renewing his suit of marriage to Esther Summerson, who, unbeknownst to him, now suffers from the scaring of smallpox:

> I could hardly have believed that anybody could in a moment have turned so red, or changed so much, as Mr. Guppy did when I put up my veil.
>
> 'I asked the favour of seeing you for a few minutes here,' said I, 'in preference to calling at Mr. Kenge's, because, remembering what you said on an occasion when you spoke with me in confidence, I feared I might otherwise cause you some embarrassment, Mr. Guppy.'
>
> I caused him embarrassment enough as it was, I am sure. I never saw such faltering, such confusion, such amazement and apprehension.
>
> 'Miss Summerson,' stammered Mr. Guppy, "I – I – beg your pardon, but in our profession – we – we – find it necessary to be

> explicit. You have referred to an occasion, miss, when I – when I did myself the honour of making declaration which--'
>
> Something seemed to rise in his throat that he could not possibly swallow. He put his hand there, coughed, made faces, tried again to swallow it, coughed again, made faces again, looked all around the room , and fluttered his papers.
>
> "*A kind of giddy sensation* has come upon me, miss,' he explained, 'which rather knocks me over. I – er – a little subject to this sort of thing – er – By George!' (615-616, emphasis mine)

Although the scene is not without its humor, Mr. Guppy's "giddy sensation," coupled with sudden inarticulate stammering, inability to swallow, uncontrollable grimaces, and absurd gestures, all serve to make him as pathologically spasmodic as he is sensationalized. Moreover, Guppy's reaction, attendant as it is on the melodramatic trope of a lifted veil and a shockingly altered countenance where one expected the familiar, prefigures the "giddy sensations" that the sensation novels of the sixties would deliver to their readers. Consider, for example, the famous touch from behind that galvanizes Walter Hartright through the plot of Collins's *The Woman in White*: " . . . in one moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me" (14). Perhaps a better comparison is Walter's reaction when his beloved Laura raises her veil beside her own tombstone: "The springs of my life fell low; and the shuddering of an unutterable dread crept over me from head to foot. . . . [T]he veiled woman had possession of me, body and soul" (367). The experience of these characters, and the

vicarious experience of the reader, are localized bursts of material and psychological shock. Literature that produced these shocks became known as sensational, emphasizing the literary links between the terms "spasmodic" and "sensational." Scenes like the above derive their sensational power from their ability to provide the reader with a burst of shock. Mr. Guppy's sudden inarticulateness, as well as Walter's overwhelming physical reactions, read like descriptions of spasmodic disorders. Victorian interest in this condition, the state of being momentarily overwhelmed by physicality, is, I have argued, related to medical and physiological research that emphasized the body as the beginning point for philosophical inquiries into Being. Both sensation fiction and Spasmodic poetry, in their emphasis on disordered bodies and in the terminology that Victorian literary critics used to describe and categorize them, demonstrate the magnitude of these concerns.

It is not surprising that sensation-producing moments like those described above tend to collate with moments of physical revelation, unveilings. Like a spasm, sensation-producing scenes rupture the calm self-maintenance of the body, usually by a reference to the suddenly disconcerting body of a character. Sensation novels are filled with nervous characters whose tremors and shakes signify their attempted repression of a nearly unbearable amount of sensation. Laura's "sensitive lips are subject to a slight nervous contraction"(40), while even the sinisterly composed Count Fosco, who incidentally, is "one of the first experimental chemists living" is marked by "nerves so finely strung that he starts at chance noises" (192). A final example of physically-expressed nervousness is from Collins's *Basil* (an extended version of this quotation also serves as the introductory epigraph for Jenny Bourne

Taylor's *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology*; clearly, the uncontrollable trembling of the character is considered a definitional part of sensation fiction):

> Her pale, sickly, moist-looking skin; her large, mild, watery, light-blue eyes; the restless, vigilant timidity of her expression; the mixture of useless hesitation and nervous, involuntary activity in every one of her actions, all furnished the same significant betrayal of a life of fear and restraint; of a disposition full of modest generosities and meek sympathies that had been crushed down past rousing to self-assertion, past ever seeing the light. There, in that mild wan face of hers – in those painful startings and hurryings when she moved, in that tremulous faint utterance when she spoke – *there* I could see one of those ghastly heart-tragedies . . . (?).

All of these characters are marked as nervously sensitive to the extent that their bodies betray a "secret" suffering that comes to the surface only sporadically. The effectivity of the sensation novel lies in the way the reader's nerves tremble in sympathy with those of the restless characters. This has been well documented in both contemporary and modern literary criticism. In "Railway Novels: Sensation Fiction and the Modernization of the Senses," Nicholas Daly points out that "the effect of the [sensation] novel seems to be to set the reader's nerves jangling in sympathetic vibration" (463). He goes on to quote an 1862 review of *Woman in White* in which Margaret Oliphant writes "the reader's nerves are affected like the hero's. He feels the thrill of . . . an ominous, painful mystery' (quoted in Daly 463). Literary analysis

is here in agreement with nineteenth-century medical science that strong emotional sensations led to nervous disorders, even and especially spasms. As early as 1837, Marshall Hall, describing the function of his Excito-Motory nervous system (see Chapter Two), posited that strong emotional disturbances could unbalance the body and cause spasmodic reactions: "Whenever this patient is excited by meeting an acquaintance, or, in any similar way, he has a little strabismus, and the hand and arm are contracted and convulsed in the most extraordinary manner: whenever he coughs, the leg is thrown involuntarily upwards. The arm is severed, as it were, from *volition*, but affected by *emotion* (Hall 102). Excess of emotion causes the patient to become spasmodic, as it does in the case of a patient described by Sir Charles Bell in *The Nervous System of the Human Body* (1844) whose "spasmodic affection of the face" is triggered "when he is anxious, or when people look steadily at him" (413; also quoted in Chapter Two).

For Bell and Hall, excess of emotion affects the body in exactly the way it does in sensation novels: the "patient" (or, in the sensation novel, the "character") is subject to ungovernable twitches and tremors that belie a highly nervous, often spasmodic, state. By the end of the century, in fact, "sensation" could be defined as 'a popular name for the *aura epileptica*, the physical premonition of an epileptic seizure" (OED). At this intersection of nerves and novels I can begin to draw the comparison between Spasmodic poetry and sensation novels that is the topic of this chapter. "Spasmodic," as a medical term, shares with "sensation" a sense of over-ripeness, an intensity that shades into material pathology. Both terms imply a diseased state of over-exertion that leads to epileptic body movements beyond the control of

the will. Spasmodic poet-heroes, characters in sensation novels, nervous patients, and readers of sensation fiction all performed the same explosive, morally ambiguous, involuntary displays of excessive emotion.

In *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology*, Taylor argues that sensation fiction, in deviating from Gothic romance, developed a different relationship to moral value: "'Sensation' was now poised against 'sensibility,' retroactively elevating the latter; unlike the quivering reaction generated by the very fantastic and exotic intensity of Gothic romance in which the finely tuned nerves operated as delicate moral mediators, the immediate nervous reaction elicited by sensation fiction apparently short-circuited morality, and thus became morbid by becoming more directly sensualized" (6). There is nothing new in claiming that sensation novels are morally ambiguous. Many contemporary critics surely found them so. Generally speaking, moreover, charges of amorality are commonly leveled against emergent art forms, just as accounts of a work's moral subversiveness are a popular starting place for recuperative efforts made by literary historians writing about minor or neglected genres. Winifred Hughes' groundbreaking *Maniac in the Cellar*, for example, defines sensation novels as melodramatic tales with the moral certainty of melodrama replaced by a disorienting modern ambiguity. What is important for my purposes about Taylor's formulation is its reliance on the body as a way of explaining sensation's amoral(izing) effects. Sensation novels, she holds, make the body react in ways that have nothing to do with distinctions between good and evil. They simply make the body react—and, for their eager audiences—the harder the better. As Daly puts it,

"Like pornography or its more innocent twin melodrama, then, the sensation novel was thought to conjure up a corporeal rather than a cerebral response in the reader" (466). Similarly, spasmodic disorders bypass the will altogether: the spasmodic has no more control over his flailing limbs than Mr. Guppy has over his shock at seeing Esther's new face. Spasmodic poet-heroes, in turn, find themselves—and their weakened, passive bodies—powerless before the overwhelming forces of poetry and poetic ambition. Spasms and sensations, then, are addressed to the sensual, primitive body, the body beyond the reach of conscience or will. Both terms evoke a kind of physicality that was deeply ambiguous to the Victorians precisely because it existed free from moral determination. There was, in fact, something almost compulsively voyeuristic about the desire to read sensation fiction or Spasmodic poetry: it titillated the body while/by depicting titillated bodies. Neither spasm nor sensations were quite wholesome: both imply a biological function that is understood to be perverted, enervating and feminizing.

In the next section of this chapter, I will expand on the connection I have made here between Spasmodic poems and sensation novels, spasming bodies and sensationalized bodies. From my examination of how sensation novels can be understood to operate in the same borderlands between biology and literature that Spasmodic poems occupy, I will now turn to generic points of comparison and intersection between Spasmodic poems and sensation novels. I hope to be able to show how the generic differences between Spasmodic poetry and sensational prose provide different yet complementary ways for us to understand Victorian psychosomatic responses to modernity. Literary attention to spasms and sensations, I

will argue, is a way that mid-century Victorians negotiated the mental and emotional experience of the subject in a world marked by technological advances such as the railway and the sometimes chaotic and estranging growth of urban centers. Setting Spasmodic poetry beside sensation fiction is useful in this context because, while the sensation novel is often understood by modern and contemporary critics to have a direct link to social and technological nineteenth-century realities, Spasmodic poetry has often been left out of such discussions. I will demonstrate the extent to which Spasmodic poetry can be located at the heart of Victorian social concerns, not, as is currently understood, the periphery of literary debates.

The Sensation Novel and Spasmodic Poetry: Some Generic Concerns

From a generic point of view, sensation novels and Spasmodic poetry have little in common. Moreover, the sensation novel is focused on plot and incident, while Spasmodic poems tend to disintegrate into plotlessness. The sensation novel aggressively addresses the modern world, taking its inspiration from the newspaper and relying on emergent technology such as the railway and the telegraph for plot twists. Spasmodic poetry was experienced by its contemporary audience as a model of writing intimately linked to an older order of poets: Byron, Shelley, Keats. The first so-called Spasmodic poem, *Festus*, was clearly a reworking of Goethe's *Faust*. Sensation novels, fast-plotted and breathless, seem to race ahead while Spasmodic poems, obsessed with literary models that were fast becoming outdated, seem to glance longingly backwards. I want to argue, however, that sensation novels and Spasmodic poems were both reactions to the new, fast pacing of modern life, with its

pressures of urbanization and technological developments that emphasized speed (again, the railway and the telegraph, among other agricultural and mercantile machines). Before turning to this argument and exploring the ways both genres negotiated a sense of modernity that emphasized the sensationalized, occasionally spasmodic body, I want to turn my attention briefly to generic concerns and some modern and contemporary reactions to these genres.

The most obvious difference between sensation novels and Spasmodic poems is generic: one is prose and the other is poetry. One addresses itself to "serious" readers of long verse, claiming its ties to Goethe and Milton. The other established itself as a popular form of enjoyable "pulp." Such distinctions, however, depend upon a misleading distinction between the popular novel and its purer, more aristocratic sibling, poetry. As Dino Franco Felluga argues in "Novel Poetry: Transgressing the Law of Genre," the distinction between prose and poetry is to a large extent a false one, as both forms can be understood to mediate on each other as well as on the complex cultural ideologies of the Victorian period. Felluga argues that the two genres constitute a boundary that modern scholars have found it inconvenient to cross, both because of the structure of academic institutions that divide specialties (and courses and jobs) by genre, and because of a bias towards the novel as the only genre polyphonous and polyglot enough to be utilized by literary scholars in the course of making cultural critiques. I will return to Felluga's work at the end of this chapter, in the course of arguing that Spasmodic poetry, understood as poetry, can provide a unique way of understanding a Victorian psychosomatic reaction to modernity. For the moment, I only want to draw attention to the fact that a steadfast

distinction between studies of the novel and studies of poetry have prevented Spasmodic poetry and sensation fiction from being studied side by side as mutual participators in nineteenth-century biological/literary discourse. That an understanding of Spasmodic poetry has much to gain from analogy to the novel is, I hope, clear from my discussion in Chapter Three of the character of the Spasmodic poet Elsley Vavasour in Kingsley's novel *Two Years Ago*. Kingsley's novel is a self-conscious rumination on the role of the poet as a failed model of mid-to-late-Victorian masculinity, yet, the novel itself is not impervious to extended streams of poetic writing. Ultimately, although Elsley dies renouncing verse, the novel depends on the interaction between Elsley, the poet, and Tom, the novel's manly representation of plain-dealing prose, in order to draw in the reader's sympathies and mobilize the plot. If, then, the novel was one of the ways contemporary critics worked out the influence of Spasmodic versions of authorship and masculinity, it makes sense to study the Spasmodic poem as sharing in the particularly material and intensified energy of the sensation novel.

Once the boundary between prose and poetry is made permeable, the links between the sensation novel and Spasmodic poetry become clear. Jerome Buckley suggested what remains one of the most readily comprehensible similarities between the two schools: their mutual interest in intensity and insanity. Explaining the fate of Spasmodic verse after Aytoun's brutally comic parody *Firmilian*, Buckley writes: "After *Firmilian* some of the energies that had animated the Spasmodic School may have been diverted, through the sixties, into the sensational fiction which carried a similar rant and melodrama and a like interest in exploring insane passion, from the

best seller *Lady Audley's Secret* to the subtler psychological thrillers of Wilkie Collins" (60). Likewise, Winifred Hughes connects sensation fiction and Spasmodic poetry in a chapter of *The Maniac in the Cellar* entitled "Influences of the Sensation Novel," in which she suggests that contemporary critics understood "sensationalism" to include, among other literary travesties, Spasmodic poetry (see Hughes, Chapter 6). Implicit in both comparisons is the idea that both the Spasmodics and the sensationalists were buoyed along the surface of Victorian literary fashion by an undercurrent taste for morbidly excessive passion. Whether, as Buckley has it, these genres were the diseased flowerings of a literary vogue that is deservedly marginalized in today's canon, or whether they express a more or less suppressed direction in which mid-Victorian literature developed (eschewing the realism of "mainstream" novelists and cogent lyricism of "mainstream" poets), it is true that contemporary reactions to them emphasized a sense of excessive energy that, when prodded, was revealed to be an empty promise. That is, contemporary critics experienced both sensation literature and Spasmodic poetry as morally hollow expressions of great emotional intensity.

The unwieldiness of sensation fiction is indicated by an 1863 review in *The Spectator* that described *Aurora Floyd* as "[a] kind of literary centipede of a hundred different joints, each separately alive, and each popping out of the one that proceeded it" (quoted in Hughes 19). Spasmodic poetry was similarly understood to be composed of a grouping of livid parts: Arthur Hugh Clough rebuked the Spasmodic poet Alexander Smith by pointing out that "simile within simile, after the manner of Chinese boxes, are more curious than beautiful; nor is it the true aim of the poet, as of

the Italian boy in the street, to poise upon his head, for public exhibition, a board crowded as thick as they can stand with images . . ." ("Recent English Poetry" 374-5; also qtd. in Chapter One). The climaxes of a sensation novel and the images of a Spasmodic poem were understood by these critics to shape their emotional intensity, an intensity that was received as a series of isolated yet incidentally connected bursts.

Because the linguistic and emotional excess of these bursts overwhelmed a holistic sense of the novel or poem as a cogent literary expression, charges of exaggerated stylistics were often leveled against both Spasmodic poems and sensation novels. Margaret Oliphant, for example, described sensation novels in an 1867 edition of *Blackwoods* as "feverish productions" (qtd in Hughes 6). Hughes describes "[the sensation novel's] typical features—both content and narrative technique" as "grandiose and inflated, glorious targets for parody" (19). For her as for contemporary critics, sensation fiction was really just "torrents of passion" in novel form (20).

In their approach to both Spasmodic poems and sensation novels, contemporary critics focused on a lack at the heart of these literary productions that they considered only half-concealed by their excessive passions. Critic H.L. Mansel notes in *Quarterly* in 1863 that "[a] sensation novel, as a matter of course, abounds in incident. Indeed, as a general rule, it consists of nothing else . . . . The human actors in the piece are, for the most part, but so many lay figures on which to exhibit a drapery of incident . . ." (qtd. in Hughes 23). Reviews of Spasmodic poetry, as I have argued in previous chapters, also focused on a morally suspect lack. Seven years earlier, Coventry Patmore complained that "Sugar-plums, quick-silvered globes,

oranges, gimracks, and lighted candles are not more incongruous ornaments to the stunted fir tree which they decorate for the nonce at a Christmas party than the tinsel thoughts and images which illustrate the subjects chosen by these [Spasmodic] poets" ("New Poets" 341; also qtd. in Chapter One). As W.C. Roscoe put it in 1854, poets of the "fireworks school," by which he means Spasmodic poets, write in "glittering showers, red, blue and white stars, which vanish into airy nothing" (*The Prospective Review* 116; also qtd. in Chapter One). Similarly, in 1863, *Punch* ran a cartoon with the caption "[d]o you know you remind me of a sensation novel; when the secret's out there's nothing in it." (qtd. in Hughes 23). *Punch*'s joke about the fundamental hollowness of the sensation novel is an echo of Aytoun's earlier claim, which I have referred to in previous chapters, that "[Spasmodic poets] really mean nothing. They are simply writing nonsense verses; but they contrive, by blazing away whole rounds of metaphor, to mask their absolute poverty of thought, and to convey the impression that there must be something under so heavy a canopy of smoke" ("Firmilian: A Tragedy" 551). The real joke is on the readers, who shiver with sensational feeling and grow heady from spasmodic metaphors, only to find nothing substantial underwrites their experience. Sensation novels and Spasmodic poems deliver sensations and spasms, but that is all. For both these sub-genres, the physical or emotional effects of such intensity were meanings in their own right.

Interestingly, contemporary critics held that sensation novels and Spasmodic poems fail to cohere into anything meaningful for entirely opposite reasons. Sensation novels contain too much emphasis on plot or "incident" to deliver any real truths about character, life or morality. Spasmodic poems, on the other hand, "rarely, if

ever, attempt anything like plot," but dwell with inordinate attention on linguistic tropes like imagery and metaphor (Aytoun, "Firmilian: A Tragedy" 534). Sensation novels contain too much plot, and Spasmodic poems contain too little. Nevertheless, critics discussed them in terms of a similar fundamental meaninglessness, a moral hollowness that is concealed from all but discriminating critic by an abundance of something else. The relationships between surface features and deeper meanings are wrong, the integration is off, the moral symmetry is compromised. As an 1870 review entitled "Sensation School" in *Temple Bar* commented, "All exaggeration, it has been said, is weakness, and grotesqueness is the resource of feeble artists" (qtd in Hughes 22). Grandiose excess, for the Victorian critic, meant another, more insidious kind of lack.

In the absence of any real explanation of what critics felt ought to have replaced the hollowness at the center of these poems and novels, one can conclude that it was the complicity of such literature with physicality that disturbed the critics and sent them in search of "something stupendous" to redeem the material experience of reading sensation fiction or Spasmodic poems. *Punch*'s parodic advertisement for a new journal, "the Sensation Times," dwells on the enervating bodily sensations of reading sensational fiction: "This Journal will be devoted chiefly to the following objects; namely, Harrowing the Mind, Making the Flesh Creep, Causing the Hair to Stand on End, Giving Shocks to the Nervous System, Destroying Conventional Moralities, and generally Unfitting the Public for the Prosaic Avocations of Life" (quoted in Hughes 3). Such a review is reminiscent of Kingsley's concerned claim that Spasmodic poetry really boils down to a poet calling attention to his "highly

organized and peculiar stomach-ache": "What gospel can there be in such a message to any honest man who has either to till the earth, plan a railroad, colonize Australia, or fight the despots, is hard to discover" ("Alexander Smith and Alexander Pope" 459). Too much attention to surface-oriented concerns like plot or linguistic finesse leads to a surface-oriented reader, whose weakened, feminized body becomes "Un[fit] for the Prosaic Avocations of Life."

I would argue that sensation fiction and Spasmodic poetry, rather than simply unfitting readers for daily life by dwelling on hollow shocks or devising thrilling but empty metaphors, are invested in exploring the physical effects of nervousness and anxiety as pertinent topics for contemporary fiction. Often, both sensation fiction and Spasmodic poetry plays out critics' concerns with the unfit body, suggesting that, like critics, these genres participated in fears about the way the body can become overwhelming. Marian Halcombe's famous collapse at the center of *The Woman in White* provides an example. Marian has crept along the roof in a midnight rainstorm in order to eavesdrop on the men who are plotting against her and her sister. A sinister, nameless dread has plagued the sisters, and the narration, to this point: Marian's heroic discovery confirms the worst and also allows her the possibility of escape. In her dairy, Marian records,

> I remember my resolution to control myself, to wait patiently hour after hour, till the chance offered of removing Laura from this horrible place, without the danger of immediate discovery and pursuit. I remember the persuasion settling itself in my mind that the words those two men had said to each other, would furnish us, not only with

> our justification for leaving the house, but with our weapons of defense against them as well. (297)

From this position of determined strength, Marian falls into an incapacitating illness that renders her escape plans moot and her discoveries all the more painful for being useless: "I sank down in darkness, here, on the floor, drenched to the skin, cramped in every limb, cold to the bones, a useless, helpless, panic-stricken creature" (296-7). The horror of the scene derives from the contrast between Marian's desire 'to control myself" and actively use her knowledge to save herself and her half-sister, and the "useless, helpless" physical state she is reduced to by a sudden fever. She registers the pain of being forced into submission by a force beyond her control, just at a point when she was ready to assume control: "Oh, my God! am I going to be ill? Ill, at such a time as this!" (298). Marian's collapse graphically represents the horror of physical helplessness, and serves as the frustrating, haunting climax of the first half of the novel. Marian's resolve never falters, but her body does. Scenes like this seem to participate with literary critics in a fear that the nervous, anxious body may become overwhelming and incapacitating. Certainly, the body is here an ambiguous force that can suddenly overcome even the most desperate of bids at self-control.

Marian's corporeal crisis recalls the sinking health of Spasmodic poet-heroes like Balder and Walter, described in Chapters Two and Three, who feel their physical beings disintegrate into passivity and weakness in ironic response to their overwhelming poetic ambitions of grandeur. Whatever the enervating effect on the reader, these spasmodic and sensational characters articulate in their material weakness an awareness of the scandalized, overwhelmed body as a central mid-to-late

nineteenth-century concern. In the following pages, I describe the ways this awareness was a characteristic of emergent modernity, following the arguments of Taylor and Daly. Critical attention to the enervating effects of Spasmodic and sensation literature can then be understood not as evidence of a diseased sensuality that underwrites both subgenres, but as part of a constellation of responses to modernity and its physical demands on the subject, particularly, as in the case of the Spasmodics, on the poet.

For the purposes of this chapter, I define "modernity" as a set of shifting understandings of technology, social relationships, and urban life. In his overview of Victorian Poetry, *English Poetry of the Victorian Period 1830-1890*, Bernard Richards begins by drawing attention to the background of emergent modernity. The book begins with these words about Turner's *Dudley Castle*, a "topological caricature of the actual industrial landscape of the Black Country" (Richards 1):

> If the following study needed to be summarized by an emblem it would be Turner's *Dudley Castle* . . . . Ruskin recognized the prophetic importance of the painting, with the old England 'of the baron and the monk', represented by the castle of the Earls of Dudley, passing away in a sort of spectral pallidity . . . and the new England of heavy industry advancing in its power and destructiveness. . . . Turner and Ruskin were alarmed, and not a little excited, by the new waste-land, a waste-land where natural and organic activity was replaced by mechanical production, and the poets and novelists were often similarly alarmed and excited. (1)

Certainly there was a lot to be excited and alarmed about. London grew from two million inhabitants to six and a half million during Victoria's reign (*Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Volume II, Seventh Edition, 1043). Steam-powered, public railways were introduced in 1830, altering the ways Victorians thought about distance, time and space. Reform bills and changes in manufacturing caused radical shifts in the social order. Richards goes on to point out that "in the wake of the decline of both classical and romantic visions . . . there was no basis for orderly progression and coherent development" (2). As science questioned the authority of the Church, and technology and industry upset social relationships, the contexts in which literature was produced shifted. This new context, according to Richards, was "urban rather than rural, rational rather than intuitional, divisive rather than communal, self-seeking rather than self-abnegating, skeptical rather than fideist, democratic rather than aristocratic, prosaic rather than poetic, scientific rather than mystic" (6). It is against this background that I want to place sensation fiction and Spasmodic poetry, for this background can help illuminate both as responses to modernity and can help showcase some of their forgotten similarities.

Spasms and Sensations: Literary Responses to Modernity

Hughes, referring to an 1857 *Edinburgh Review* article by Fitzjames Stephen that claims "ordinary domestic relations . . . as the legitimate province of novels," argues that sensation novels scandalized any sense of domestic realism through lurid descriptions of bigamy, murder and sexual immorality. The crux of Hughes's argument is not so much that the sensation novel's indiscretion was shocking,

although clearly it was, but that sensation novels were operating outside an understanding of what novels ought to be about. They were transgressive because their version of realism was based on the extraordinary rather than the ordinary. Matthew Arnold's oft-cited belief that poetry ought to describe great actions is poetry's generic counterpoint to Stephen's claim that ordinary domestic relations ought to shape the novel. And, like sensation fiction, Spasmodic poetry neglects the popular critical definition of the genre's responsibilities. Both Spasmodic poetry and sensation fiction do something they aren't supposed to: they explore the pathological fringe of established behavior. Spasmodic poet-heroes rarely act, much less act heroically, while sensation characters are often sexual and legal outlaws. In terms of generic expectations, then, Spasmodic poetry and sensation fiction were judged deviant. I would argue, however, that both were in fact reacting to contemporary pressures on daily life and meditating on the role of art in this new context. That is, instead of articulating the seedy underside of repressive Victorian morality and restraint, as critics such as Buckley have argued, sensation fiction and Spasmodic poetry were formulating a way of dealing with the urbanization, increased speed and new technologies of modern life that focused on the body's responses to modernity.

Taylor argues that the 1860s can be understood as "the age of sensation" not because of the rather circular argument that it saw the production of so many sensation novels, but because sensation "encapsulated the experience of modernity itself—the sense of continuous and rapid change, of shocks, thrills, intensity, excitement" (3). Sensation fiction—in its frequent invocation of the railway, telegraph and newspaper—is understood by most literary critics to be steeped in this

"experience of modernity." Because prose fiction, as I have argued earlier, seems to literary critics to represent social and cultural realisms more transparently than verse, considerable attention has been paid to sensation fiction's concern with modernity. Spasmodic poetry has not been studied in the same way, although its contemporary critics dwelt often on the relationship between poetics generally speaking and "the age." Much Spasmodic poetry aggressively invites such attention by featuring a poet-hero whose ambition is to "set the age to music," as in the case of Balder and Walter's desires to write epic poems more powerful than the world has ever seen. Critical responses to these assertions address the relationships between modernity and verse. Aytoun, in a review called "Alexander Smith's Poems" that addressed itself to Spasmodic poetry generally, doubts whether the modern condition is inherently poetic: "Can [the poet] throw over the cotton trade 'the light that never was on sea or shore?' . . . Will the railway station and the electric telegraph figure picturesquely in the poet's dream? Yet, when the age is set to music, these cords will not be the most subdued in the composition" (341). Further:

> When polkas were first introduced, many familiar sounds were parodied, to give character to the tunes of the new measure. Among these were the Railway-polka, in which the noise of the wheels and the clatter of machinery were admirably imitated; while a startling reality was given to the whole, by the occasional hoarse scream of the engine. Now, we fear that the effort of the poet to set the age to music would result in something resembling the railway polka—something more

> creditable as a work of ingenuity than of art, and embodying more appeals to the sense than to the heart or imagination (347).

Aytoun argues that poets write contemporary verse not by setting out to do so, but by being unconsciously steeped in the conventions and aesthetics of their day. Nevertheless, he worries that certain ages (such as his own) "may be more suitably reproduced through some other medium than verse—in newspapers, for instance, or in advertising vans" (339).

Other critics, such as Arthur Hugh Clough, believed verse could and should represent the fervor and vigor of fast-paced city life, redeeming the weariness of the modern subject with poetic inspiration. Of Alexander Smith's poems, he writes,

> They have something substantial and lifelike, immediate and firsthand, about them. There is a charm, for example, in finding, as we do, continual images drawn from the busy seats of industry; it seems to satisfy a want that we have long been conscious of, when we see the black streams that welter out of factories, the dreary lengths of urban and suburban dustiness . . . irradiated with a gleam of divine purity. ("Recent English Poetry" 1256)

Meanwhile, Arnold, like Aytoun, argued against modern dreariness as a suitable poetic topic. In a response to Masson's review of some Spasmodic poetry by Smith, Arnold famously argued that modern introspection has no place in poetic endeavor. Spasmodic poetry is at the core of this debate; it is in the context of reviews over Spasmodic poetry that critics attempted to collate the moral and literary demands of modernity. Victorian debates over the future of poetry attempted to work out what

relationships between verse and modernity could exist. Were modernity and technology fit topics for poetry? If not, what ought poetry be about? Spasmodic poetry brought these debates to a head because of the way their poet-heroes boldly claimed to represent their age. (It should be noted, in any event, that these poet-heroes generally fail, or succeed only after altering their ambition—a point often ignored by Victorian critics). Precisely because Victorian critics were so invested in debates over poetry and modernity, it makes sense to consider poetry, and Spasmodic poetry particularly, as one of the main ways Victorian critics worried over modernity. As Aytoun points out, one of the main concerns was that poetry of the modern condition would come to embody "more appeals to the sense than to the heart or imagination." That is, instead of existing as a fully integrated piece of imaginative or emotional cohesion, the modern poem, like the jumpy, jumbled sounds of the Railway-polka, shot through with the screech of the engine, would be reduced to a sensuous reenactment of the confusions of contemporary life.

In "Railway Novels: Sensation Fiction and the Modernization of the Senses," Daly's argument about the relationship between modernity and sensation fiction also turns on the material effects of modernity. Daly reads heated critical responses to the sensation novel side-by-side with contemporary reactions to the railway, suggesting that the fervor over both marked them as significant ways Victorians attempted to come to terms with "a specifically modern form of sensory experience" (471). Daly's sensitive argument is worth describing at some length. Turning to Benjamin's essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Daly crystallizes Benjamin's understanding of anxiety as a defense mechanism against the modern danger of shock. Daly explains:

"Where nervousness or anxiety is, shock is not: by living on his/her nerves, the modern subject seeks to actually *cocoon* him or herself from the impact of modernization" (465). Working from the premise that "anxiety might not always be a bad thing" Daly is able to read sensation fiction as a kind of sensory education manual for Victorian subjects facing a newly modernized world (465). Thus, while agreeing with D.A. Miller's insight in *The Novel and the Police* that sensation fiction "offers us one of the first instances of modern literature to address itself primarily to the sympathetic nervous system," Daly disagrees with Miller's further contention that *Woman in White* uses the condition of nervousness as a way of invoking and working out homosexual panic. Daly notes that Miller's reading of this prototypical sensational novel is dependant on his description of the scene where Anne Catherick scandalizes Walter by touching him from behind on the lonely road to London at night as the primal scene that creates the nervousness that pervades the rest of the novel. As Daly points out, Walter was restless to begin with: he was on the road late at night because his sensitive nerves kept him out walking while everyone else was in bed. Positing nervousness as the *sine qua non* of sensation fiction, Daly suggests that we must understand this nervousness not as symptomatic, as Miller has it, of other thematic and social pressures, but as significant in and of itself. Indeed, this argument could address itself equally well to nineteenth-century critics of Spasmodicism and sensationalism: there has been a long literary tradition of dismissing the nervous orientation of these poems and novels as a sign of morally flawed writing. Daly's argument is useful in that it provides a model for studying the physicality of the

sensation novel as part of its literary and cultural relevance; I hope to claim a similar relevance for Spasmodic poetry.

Daly goes on to explain that the ways Victorians conditioned themselves to the new railway system provides an analogy to the ways sensation novels presented nervousness as the precondition of modernity. The railway offered the potential for material shocks to the nervous system in terms of its "rapid serious of jolts" and the inevitability of accidents (469). This contemporary concern with the physical and psychological effects of railway travel was such that "[w]hen the First World War sent home the first cases of 'shell shock,' there was already an abundant medical literature of shock stemming from the railways" (Daly 469). Daly argues that Victorians unconsciously attempted to buffer themselves against such raw moments of shock by a generalized anxiety about keeping to schedules, getting to the train on time: "the modern traveler needed to have a watch, and anxiety about missing trains became a recognizable medical complaint . . . . For the railway—one might as well say the advent of technology into everyday life—to be literally a less shocking experience, the traveler had to be brought (mentally) up to speed" (472). The crux of Daly's argument is that sensation novels, with their plot devices that often hinged on accidents or crises of timing in conjunction with modern technologies such as the railway or the telegraph, helped adjust the Victorian subject to this new sense of anxious temporality: "What the sensation novel was preaching to the nerves was a new time-discipline. Just as the cinema would later train people in the mode of distracted perception necessary to navigate the modern metropolis, in the 1860s the sensation novel trained its readers to deal with the temporality of the railway age."

The mid-to-late Victorian condition, then, was that of the "modern, nervous, and punctual body" (475).

I have dwelt on Daly's argument at length because it provides a useful background for beginning to consider how Spasmodic poetry is lyrically and thematically modern. As the reviews quoted above suggest, the Spasmodics were perceived to be handicapped by a prosaic age and deeply out of sync with critical demands that contemporary poetics provide a counterpoint to the taxing and unlovely demands of modernity, rather than extended meditations on it. Their perceived peripherality has sometimes prevented them from being seen as participators in the social climate of the late nineteenth century, although recent work by young scholars has read them alongside technologies such as the telegraph that themselves work by producing rhythms. What I want to suggest here is that the textual, metrical and emotional spasms of Spasmodic poetry bear a resemblance to the "shocks" of modernity Daly describes. What, after all, are shocks but spasms? The "frenzied energy" that sensation fiction and Spasmodic poems are accused of sharing can be understood as the energy of modernity, as both sub-genres came to great popularity in the middle of the nineteenth-century and both were critically seen as having a heightened relationship to "the age." While sensation fiction may seek to orient readers in the new temporal anxiousness of modern life, Spasmodic poetry finds its aesthetic appeal in reproducing over and over again the spasm of the tormented body. Sensation novels work by embedding timeliness in the logic of their plots—Count Fosco's evil plan to replace Laura with Anne fails because Anne dies before Laura gets on the train to London—while Spasmodic poems are invested in moments of

emotional and lyric intensification that undercut any sense of plot development. Because they are poems, it is reasonable to expect a less narratively-driven ethos from them, but it is also worth noting that Spasmodic poems dwell on the psychological effects of modernity by replaying over and over the spasms of the maladjusted body. Like dancers in the Railway-polka, Spasmodic verse (and spasmodicized readers) were jerked about to the tune of modern confusion.

An example of Spasmodicism's often-elided concern with the modern condition is J. Westland Marston's *Gerald; a Dramatic Poem.* Although it was published in 1842, *Gerald* investigates the effects of urbanization and market-place competition on poets and poetry in a way that rang true throughout the following decades. Gerald, an aspiring poet, draws his inspiration from nature, finding the first inklings of his poetic calling while contemplating the moon and growing teary-eyed over summer storms. Even the metaphors he employs to describe his poetic ambitions are rooted in nature: "What, shall no harvest burst / From seed like this?" (11). Gerald, however, is out of place in this rural life. He sees himself as meant for greater things, and plans to leave the country in order to seek his fortune and fame in the City, despite his father's foreboding prediction that "In that huge, noisy, smoky town, / To which he hastens, he'll find not a friend / To beat his Father. . . . /" (17). Once in town, Gerald writes easily enough, but finds himself neglected by potential readers. Unable to compromise his belief that poetry was meant to convey truth and instruct the morals and emotions, Gerald does not write anything that his prosaic would-be audience considers worth buying, and he grows increasingly depressed and dramatic. He prefers death to dilution of his art: "I cannot alter now, nor bend my mind / To

common uses. I would rather die,—" (47). Ashton, a friend whose literary success is a result of his attention to readers' pleasure rather than to idealized truth, responds: "I gather from this moving speech, you chafe / Because the world prefers plain prose to rhyme, / Reality to fancy, and dull fact / To poet's fiction" (47). Gerald, in fact, does more than chafe: he eventually does die from a fever brought on by poverty and disappointment. His poetry becomes successful posthumously, but it is too late for Gerald, who dies realizing that his ambitions to be the most uncompromising of prophets stood in the way of his ability to connect emotionally with the world.

At the beginning of the poem, Marston remarks "[t]he Reader will bear in mind that all I have contemplated is the illumination of *certain points* in Gerald's mental history—to show the *crises* of his developments, not their *progress*" (vi). These moments of crises are moments when Gerald's poetic temperament overflows the constraints of city life and city concerns; they are Spasmodic moments of poetic intensity. Marston's attention to momentary intensity over linear progress marks his poem as Spasmodic, just as it orients *Gerald* towards literary modernism. Buckley notes that *Gerald* "spurns the logic of structure with nonchalant indifference" (47), but goes on to add that Marston's treatment of psychological inwardness "remotely suggests the kind of poetic expressionism which Virginia Woolf achieved in *The Waves,*" as well as becoming a model for the lyric monodramas of Tennyson (48). *Gerald*'s concern with the modern subject in the city, then, is both thematic and stylistic, as Gerald struggles with poverty and *Gerald* establishes a modern lyricism of moment and interiority. Spasmodic verse, with its apparently pathological attention

to the body overwhelmed, becomes a logical way of demonstrating the poet at odds with the world around him.

According to Daly, sensation fiction oriented the Victorian subject to the modern world. Spasmodic poetry refines this position, addressing itself to the plight of the poet in the modern world. In *Gerald*, the over-populated, prosaic urban center represents the hostility of modernity to the Romantic poet-figure, steeped in natural images, highly idealistic, and easily estranged. At one point, *Gerald* seeks employment as a clerk for a successful merchant. The condition of his employment is a complete rejection of poetry: "This must be altered—couplets, sonnets, odes entirely foresworn. Else, indeed, you might infect my clerks, disturb—nay ruin—my whole mercantile economy" (63). The mercantile economy remains intact; Gerald turns down the job, and retreats to his hovel to die. The poet's plight was the standard Spasmodic theme: while *Gerald* traces a poet's death at the hands of a hostile economy, *Balder* describes a poet's coming to terms with his exaggerated introspection as "a predominant intellectual misfortune of our day" (Dobell *Poetical Works* 5) and *A Life-Drama* is an intense and self-isolated young man's education in how to be a materially successful poet. In addition to foregrounding the poetic figure, Spasmodic poetry necessarily also mediates on poetic form; spasmodic characters spasm with barely-repressed intensity, while Spasmodic verse spasms with the linguistic intensity necessary to represent such intensification.

Two decades before the emergence of sensation fiction, then, Spasmodic poetry began to contemplate the role of the poet in the modern world, defined by the economic privations and social unrest of the 1840s. A decade before Arnold's *The*

Scholar Gypsy, Spasmodic poets, as in the following lines from that poem, contemplate the weariness of modernity: "For what wears out the life or mortal men? / 'Tis that from change to change their being rolls; / 'Tis that repeated shocks, again, again, / Exhaust the energy of strongest souls / And numb the elastic powers" (lines 142-146). The spasms of Spasmodic poetry can be understood as these "repeated shocks," emanating from the frustrated ambition and overwhelming psychological introspection of the poet-heroes in Spasmodic poems as they faced the exacerbating pressures of modernity.

While Spasmodic poetry explored the pathology of the lyric spasm as a half-thwarted physical response to modernity, Victorian thinking about rhythm and meter focused on the organic, pre-historic body. In a North British Review essay from 1853, William Masson, like Daly, addresses temporality as a key term in understanding aesthetic form. This essay pairs a review of contemporary theories of poetry with a review of Alexander Smith's Spasmodic *A Life-Drama*. For Masson, a "theory of verse in its origin and nature" would "clearly consist in the assertion of this, as a fundamental fact of nature, that, when the mind of man is either exercised to a certain pitch, or engaged in a certain kind of exercise, its transactions adjust themselves, in a more express manner than usual, to time as meted out in beats or intervals" (327). Masson's sense of the temporality of poetry is based on his recognition that the human body responds to metrical patterns:

> [T]he swinging of a student to and fro in his chair, during a fit of cogitation, the oratorical see-saw, the evident connexion of mental states with the breathings and the pulse-beats, the power of the tick-

> tick of a clock to induce reverie and of the clinkum-clankum of a bell to make the fool think words to it, are all instances of the existence of such a law (327-8).

In this formulation, rhythm and composition are aligned with pure physical reflex. Furthermore, Masson locates rhythm not in the conscious efforts of versification, but in impassioned emotional states that, because of deeply ingrained corporeal impulse, express themselves in meter: "it is on passion, and not on poetry, that metre holds by legal tenure" (328). The impassioned subject is the metrical subject: meter is the material manifestation of emotion. Given these theories it is not surprising that Masson believed "a true allegory of the state of one's mind . . . is perhaps the highest thing that one can attempt in the way of fictitious art" (338). Nor is it surprising that he was notably sympathetic to Spasmodic verse, with its intense focus on the individual development of the poetic mind.

A brief turn to spasmodic versification might help demonstrate the ways Spasmodic poetry encoded what I have been referring to as the spasms and jolts of modernity. In Chapter Two, I discussed the metrical intensity of Spasmodic verse, noting its often heavy, irregular beats and impassioned syntax. Dobell's infamous lines of pure ejaculation ("Ah! ah! ah! / Ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! / By Satan! This is well. What! am I judged?" 260, see also Chapter Two) read like an illustration of the railway-polka poetry Aytoun found so absurd. The metrical irregularities I described in Chapter Two, however, are only one example of what critics meant when they criticized a poem as "spasmodic." In the absence of any strict definition, the term came to mean any verse that was particularly excessive in its use

of metaphor or emotional shading. Thus, Walter's headlong yearning after "Poesy" in *A Life-Drama*, however metrically consistent, was spasmodic in its flights of intensity. In this context, *Gerald* makes an interesting comment on the limits of poetic language, a comment to which Aytoun might have been sympathetic. In "The World Part III," the section of *Gerald* in which Gerald is most severely tried by poverty and the neglect with which his poetic efforts have been met, the poem lapses into prose. "Strange state," Gerald ponders in prose, "[W]hen our misery becomes the toy of our speculation! Oh , that from this trance there were no *awakening . . . Why need there be?*" (73). Lamenting the tendency of the modern subject to self-reflection and solipsism, the poem turns from poetry itself, as if to suggest the inhospitability of modern despair to poetic language. Gerald can only ponder suicide in prose; his reflective despair removes him from the trance-like state of rhythmic composition Masson describes. His passion, rather than leading to verse, jams its production. In this sense, it is the movement of *Gerald* from poetry to prose, and ultimately back again, as Gerald becomes a successful poet, that marks *Gerald* Spasmodic. "Spasmodic" then comes to mean not just a style of poetry, but a relationship to language itself.

Two visions of the time-oriented subject emerge from Daly's theory of modernity and Masson's theory of poetry. One, in keeping with Daly's railway-bound subject, is the body transformed and disciplined (for better or worse) by technology. The other emphasized an organic, impassioned, metrical body. Both of these are linked by their dependence on the idea of rhythm: on the one hand, Daly's punctual subject is inuring him/herself from the arrhythmic jolts and bolts of the railway (a

technology which many critics found unpoetic to the point of absurdity). On the other, Masson's poetic subject is poetic by virtue of the body's innate ability to produce meter when excited. Spasmodic poetry is situated at the intersection of these two theories. Spasmodic poetry moves by spasms; spasms are like meter, but less graceful (a beat of meter suggests keeping time, while a spasm suggests a loosening of control). Spasms are what happens when there is too much passion in a poem, when the passion overturns the reason and overflows the temporal pacedness of metrical flow. They are disorderly too, like accidents and incidental jolts on an otherwise smooth train ride. In this sense, spasms exist as a symptom of the body at its most developed, a specific symptom of the modern subject who takes the railway and is jostled and jolted through city streets. They also exist as a manifestation of the prehistoric, organic body, moved by emotion but not by the railway. Spasms, as I have argued, are moments of intensified passion that express themselves through the sudden assertion of the body-as-matter, puncture moments of emotional crisis that evoke the naked, primitive body that is the alter ego of mechanized modernism. Spasms suggest the beats of meter without its coherence, bearing a metaphorical relationship to the frenzied pace of modern life and the splintered, incohesive subject it created. Moreover, the physical pathologization suggested by Victorian medical usages of "spasmodic" serve to render Spasmodic verse not just an exploration of the poet under modern conditions, but a diseased symptom of those conditions.

Sensation fiction's concern with this simultaneously modern and primitive subject is far more evident than Spasmodicism's similar concern. As Taylor explains, sensation fiction "helped to articulate anxiety about immanent cultural decline by

referring to an image of an implicitly 'feminine' body that was at once its product and metonymic model" (4). This modern body, trembling with nervousness, is sublimely responsive to excitement and emotion. Taylor argues that the enervated, feminized body of sensation fiction "suggested in a single figure the most primitive and atavistic of human responses and the most advanced signs of civilization, of frenetic modern life" (4). Wilkie Collins's sensational *The Lady and the Law* provides an example of a character whose unmistakably spasmodic behavior is symptomatic of both his enervating cultural sophistication and his crude physicality: Miserrimus Dexter. An accomplished but deeply morbid artist, Dexter is an example of the ways Spasmodic poetry and sensation fiction share a concern with the effects of modernity on the body and an anxiety over the ways the nervous body reveals its own psychosomatic weakness. When the protagonist first sees Dexter, she experiences his disability through the metaphor of a train engine:

> I heard the rumbling and whistling sounds approach me. A high chair on wheels moved by, through the field of red light, carrying a shadowy figure with floating hair, and arms furiously raised and lowered, working the machinery that propelled the chair at its utmost rate of speed. . . . The strident wheels turned at the far end of the room and came back. The fantastic and frightful apparition, man and machinery blended in one—the new Centaur, half man, half chair—flew by me again in the dying light. . . In that moment, he saw us! The wheel-chair stopped with a shock that shook the crazy old floor of the room, altered its course, and flew at us with the rush of a wild animal. (193)

Taylor describes this "new Centaur, half man, half chair" as emblematic of the Victorian pessimism over the effects of technology on humanity. Dexter is a highly nervous locomotive himself, but he is as much unevolved ape as he is machine. Out of his chair, he propels himself over the floor "as lightly as a monkey, on his hands" (194). His physical deformity is matched by a mental instability that echoes spasmodic disorders. When excited, "the lines flow out like lava from the eruption of my volcanic mind" (193). His paintings are full of "diseased and riotous delight" (213), echoing typical reviews of Spasmodic verse that described "power and brilliance" with "certainly a degree of disease in it" (Gilfillan 61). Dexter's graphic, lurid art is "badly painted" but contains "signs of a powerful imagination, and even of a poetic feeling for the supernatural" (214).

Dexter is spasmodic in his aesthetic temperament, but even more so in his fits of insanity. When calm, he cooks, paints, writes poetry, and talks articulately, all while wearing quilted pink silk. When agitated, his "brains boil in [his] head" (191) and he "must take refuge in physical exercise." (244) In this way, his symptoms exactly match those of a patient suffering from what Maudsley calls *Neurosis spasmodica*: "he may act calm and rationally for the most part, yet now and then his unconscious nature, overpowering him and surprising him, instigates eccentric or extravagant actions" (*Physiology and Pathology of the Mind* 224). These fits of madness, like those of the spasmodic patient, are instigated by the sudden explosion of his "immense imagination" (*The Lady and the Law* 191). At these times he declares "I must blow off steam, or I shall explode in my pink jacket on the spot" (244). In one scene he propels himself out of his chair and hops back and forth across

the room "like a monstrous frog," crying "I am like the Spirit of Earth in Shelley's poem . . . . The joy, the triumph, the delight, the madness! The boundless, overflowing, bursting gladness, The vaporous exultation not to be confined!" (245). His poetic intensity aligns him with the poet-heroes of Spasmodic poems, while the nervous hopping of his pathological body renders him medically spasmodic. Just as the spasmodic body occasionally exposes a brute materiality experienced by the Victorians as shameful and feminizing, Dexter "openly expresses . . . thoughts and feelings which most of us are ashamed of as weaknesses, and which we keep to ourselves accordingly" (*The Lady and The Law* 206).

Both sensationally nervous and spasmodic, Dexter is a locus of corporeal and spiritual decay. One symptom of this decay is his feminization. He dresses a little too sumptuously, explaining to an amazed visitor that "except in this ignoble and material nineteenth century, men have always worn precious stuffs and beautiful colours as well as women. . . . I like to be bright and beautiful" (216). He follows "the woman's wise example" and does embroidery, "which keeps the nerves steady and leaves the mind calm and free" (219). Moreover, he has "the eyes and hands of a beautiful woman." These attributes and habits, combined with his hysterical behavior and the passivity which he submits to it ("I can't help it. I am obliged to do it . . . I let myself loose" 203), all announce him as enervated and emasculated. Much attention has been paid to the nineteenth-century concern that modern luxury would ruin the masculinity of the upper classes. Certainly Dexter's character embodies this fear, as do many characters in sensation novels, whose nervous dread and morbid sensitivity render them effeminate. *The Law and the Lady* itself is remarkably concerned with gender,

as its plot is driven by a female detective who must penetrate the masculine domain of the law. Where her will is almost problematically strong (Collins is at pains to emphasize that her movement in the largely male spheres of law and criminal investigation are motivated by a womanly concern for her husband), Dexter's is nearly absent. If she is a woman adopting traditionally masculine roles, he, an emasculated male, is her ghastly opposite: a vision of masculinity undone by a physical and mental deformity that is both symptomatic and emblematic of the enervating effect of modern culture. Like Kingsley's Spasmodic anti-hero Elsley (described in Chapter Three), Dexter is a failed participator in mainstream nineteenth-century constructions of masculinity.

Twentieth-century critical studies of nerves and literature often turn to the novel as a way of approaching intersections of effeminacy, nervousness, and narrative. The sensation novel has received considerable attention in this context, as have many other novels. I have argued throughout that Spasmodic poetry is something of an unspoken early partner in the contemporary and modern critical discourses that surround sensation fiction, but has been neglected by modern critics because poetry is often thought to be outside the realm of cultural relevance. Felluga, whose article on generic crossings I mentioned earlier in the course of describing Victorian generic distinctions, suggests that the Victorian obsession with taxonomy led to belabored nineteenth-century divisions between prose as a socially relevant form, and poetry as "a pure form, somehow separate from the concerns of politics, the market, and ideology" (493). However, Felluga points out that even nineteenth-century critics had a hard time reinforcing this distinction, as poetry, like every other

art form, engages "the historical, cultural and technological changes of its time" (494). Further, he notes that "much nineteenth-century poetry is very much aware of this fact" (494). Certainly this difficulty of generic expectations entered into critical discussions of Spasmodic poetry, as the critics I have described above attempted to work out whether or not poetry was a fit genre for representing modernity. Clough brings the issue to a head in a review of Smith's *A Life- Drama* that questions generic assumptions about poetry and the novel:

> [P]oems after classical models, poems from Oriental sources, and the like, have undoubtedly a great literary value. Yet there is no question, it is plain and patent enough, that people much prefer Vanity Fair and Bleak House. Why so? Is it simply because we have grown prudent and prosaic, and should not welcome, as our fathers did, the Marmions and the Rokebys, the Childe Harolds, and the Corsairs? Or is it, that to be wildly popular, to gain the ear of multitudes, to shake the hearts of men, poetry should deal more than at present it usually does, with general wants, ordinary feelings, the obvious rather than the rare facts of human nature? ("Recent English Poetry" anthologized in *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory* 1255)

Spasmodic verse, curiously, was situated at this intersection of modernity, genre, and the desires of the reading public that Clough describes. Although neither Clough nor any other critics found in Spasmodic poems "the obvious . . . facts of human nature," and although they certainly did draw on the Marmions and Childe Harolds that are so unsympathetic to daily Victorian concerns, they were key participators in Victorian

debates over what exactly poetry ought to be (about). This is perhaps because they resisted Victorian literary categories of lyricism and realism as surely as they resisted Victorian social and medical categories of health, masculinity and sanity. Nevertheless, because Spasmodic poems have been perceived as an obscure genre (rather than questioners of generic limitations), as failed verse (rather than experimental verse addressing itself to available models of poetic authorship) and as unhealthy poetry (rather than as poetry exploring the body in a state of crisis brought on by changing social conditions and the medical re-evaluation of the importance of biology), they have been considered peripheral to Victorian literary and social matters.

Felluga seeks to readjust the lens through which we see certain genres as "peripheral" or "central" to dominant Victorian ideologies by examining the ways many Victorian works fail to congeal logically into a specific genre. He finds the generic crossings between poetry and prose nowhere more evident than in the novel's concern with casting out the Romantic figure of the poet: "After Byron, the novel and society at large recognized in many Victorian poetic forms a real challenge to the dominant ideologies of the age. How else can we explain why so many Victorian novels felt the need to excise the specter of the poetic, often with Byron and Romantic excessiveness as foils for the dangers perceived in poetry at large?" (491). Felluga, in fact, draws an analogy between poetry's ability to question dominant nineteenth-century ideology and the threat posed to those largely socially-oriented ideologies by Romantic strains of nineteenth-century poets, "from the Spasmodics" to "the Decadents of the late-Victorian period" (491).

I would offer Collins's *The Law and the Lady* (as well as Kingsley's *Two Years Ago*) as an example of a Victorian novel that reinscribes the threatening model of Spasmodic authorship as unmasculine and absurd. Dexter is the only artist in a book full of lawyers and investigators; he is the only character to invoke Shelley's spirit, the only character who plays out in his own body the conflict between technological advances like the railway and the need for private artistic expression of self. He is also the only effeminate, handicapped, spasmodic character. Felluga argues that Victorian efforts to disentangle poetry from prose are given the lie by novels like this one that invoke the Romantic/ poetic in order to banish it. He goes further, suggesting that genres are "performative in Judith Butler's sense of the term" ("Novel Poetry: Transgressing the Law of Genre" 494). That is, genre indicators, as indispensable as they are as descriptive terms to guide a reading public, also really have no exact referent. Genres are "after all, so unstable as to be unable fully to describe what they name," as suggested by the vast number of sub-genres and the uncertain boundaries between genres (494). Therefore, genres can only "retroactively create" the firm distinctions they seek to describe (494).

Demarcations between genders work along the same lines, as Felluga's invocation of Butler suggests. Felluga holds that Victorian critics, participating in the vogue for taxonomy, were at pains to establish distinctions between genres and subgenres, pure and impure, and when these efforts inevitably failed, they turned to the language of gender to reify genre. Thus, spasmodic poet figures, operating on the pale fringe of acceptable poetic authorship, were inscribed (both in novels and in critical discourse) as unmanly and unhealthy. The Spasmodic poet, a frustrated man

seeking a lyric understanding of modernity, jerked in time with the arrhythmic convulsions of an increasingly socially and technologically complex world. These jerks defined him as effeminate. Like Walter, the poet-hero of *A Life-Drama*, Gerald is systematically described as unmanly: villagers dismiss him as "A kill-joy! A proud upstart," largely because of his physical weakness: "Could he clear yon fence? / Or bring his bird down deftly?" (11). As in the case of Dexter, Gerald's physical incapacity is directly related to his artistic abilities.

If, as Felluga compellingly suggests, the slipperiness of genre asks us to "examine the ways that poetry speaks to the dominant ideologies of the Victorian period," especially as embodied by the "bourgeois, realist, domestic novel," my reading of Spasmodic poetry as a meditation on the body's reaction to the pressures of technology and urbanization becomes particularly relevant (496). Sensation novels, as Daly demonstrates, participated in this meditation. But, I would add, the sensation novel, like other novels I referred to by Dickens and Kingsley, also tried to exorcise and isolate the threat posed by spasmodic versions of poetic authorship. While both sensation novels and spasmodic poetry investigated the body's psychosomatic response to a changing world, the novel (in conjunction with contemporary critics) was at pains to describe the throbbing, spasmodic body as detrimental to the business of living in that world. Daly has argued that sensation novels sought to educate the modern body in how to negotiate the pressures of a jarring world. Because it has been considered as poetry, a pure, "high," culturally irrelevant form, Spasmodic verse cannot be seen to have such a practical, socially-oriented pedagogical impulse. Instead, it stands outside dominant discourses on change and social responsibility.

Spasmodic behavior, therefore, has not been studied in conjunction with other nineteenth-century nervous disorders like hysteria, which has been linked to history, culture, gender and literary production in specific ways by current critics. Moreover, Spasmodicism might well stand as a literary experiment in representing a world newly understood as arrhythmic and disorienting. Its "excessive" passions may be understood not as failed attempts at writing verse, but as explorations of the body's new importance to Victorian understandings of being and consciousness (especially to the extent that these passions were understood as affecting the body of the poet-hero in the poem and to the extent that they were given the medically-laden epithet "spasmodic). The critical fate of the Spasmodics also suggests that, in a perceived "unpoetic" age of increased chaos and disorientation, the world wanted poetry that reflects integration, self-control, and calm. The clotted language and internal disorderliness of Spasmodic composition held up an unflattering mirror.

Additionally, the novel's adamant insistence on the absurdity and uselessness of spasmodic characters obscures a crucial fact: Spasmodic poems themselves do not whole-heartedly endorse Romantic models of authorship. The typical Spasmodic plot involves a poet who longs to write from a position outside society, a position of poetic transcendence and inspiration. He always fails, and ends up mad (as in the case of Balder), dead (as in the case of Gerald), or happily subsumed into the social realities he initially scorned (as in the case of Walter). Whatever their fate, all of these poet heroes recognize at some point that the estranged position from which they began is flawed because of its isolation, and thus cannot be the site of production for poetry that touches the human spirit. Spasmodicism, far from existing outside of

dominant Victorian social concerns, addressed itself to the heart of them, attempting to work out what it means to be a poet in an arrhythmic, urbanized modern world where the immediate poetic models available from Romanticism no longer quite apply.

Conclusion
The Spasmodic Fall

This dissertation is full of people falling. In Aytoun's parody of Spasmodic poetry, *Firmilian*, one poet falls from the Tennysonian heights of St. Simeon Stylites's Pillar, while Firmilian himself eventually topples off a mountain. In Kingsley's novel about poetry and prose, *Two Years Ago*, the Spasmodic poet Vavasour falls into the mud at every emotional climax. Even Arnold's *Empedocles on Etna*, suppressed by its author for its latent Spasmodic sympathies, ends with a willed fall, Empedocles's suicide leap. One of the framing stories for this dissertation is Jerome Buckley's retelling of Sydney's Dobell's real-life "sorry fall" from an Italian cliff. It seems that the imputed act of falling is one of the recurring ways critics of Spasmodic poetry expressed their sense of Spasmodic poetry as an enervating, failed sub-genre. By an odd, awful coincidence, a series of actual falls ended the life and career of one of the most notable Spasmodics. According to biographer and editor John Nichol, Sydney Dobell suffered "a definite seizure of epileptiform disease" as a result of his Italian fall, rendering him literally, medically spasmodic (*The Poetical Works of Sydney Dobell* xxviii). When Dobell's horse threw him four years later, the fall left him an invalid, unable to write, until his death.

The fall is a particularly apt metaphor for most critics' characterizations of Spasmodic behavior. It implies absurdity and failure, an inability to retain control of the simplest motor functions. Moreover, it suggests a complete unbalancing, a sense of moral and material vertigo. When Dobell falls in Buckley's account of the story, he

is not just clumsy, he is foolish and emasculated. Dobell's biographer Emily Jolly unintentionally reinforces the comedy of Dobell's clumsiness. In her account, he falls because "he walked some paces backwards, entirely absorbed in what he was looking at" (259). Then, after coming too in the darkness of a deep hole, he is forced to draw attention to himself with "his hat, stuck on the top of his sun-umbrella, thrust through the hole." Eventually, he is rescued by an observant "herd-boy" (II. 259-60). Dobell may have cut a ridiculous figure, but the truly ominous results of his fall were only evident the next day, when, according to Jolly, he experienced "qualms of a peculiar kind of sickness" (260). In terms of biography, Dobell's spasms signify the illness that ended his life. In terms of his poetry, his Spasmodicism signified the end of his career. Material or literary, the spasms suggest a potentially lethal lapse of balance, a sinister pathology that is all the more damaging for being so very absurd.

When the Spasmodic poet Firmilian plummets from the cliff in *Firmilian*, and when Vavasour falls into the mud repeatedly throughout *Two Years Ago*, their lack of equilibrium is meant to stand for a greater moral failing. In a sense, these falls echo the fall of Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*, one of the earliest Spasmodic pretexts. Spasmodics share with Milton's anti-hero a great deal of egotism and a perceived lack of moral orientation. Unlike Milton's Satan, but obviously aspiring to his granduer, Spasmodic poets and their poet-heroes are absurd, caricaturish, and weak. They fall because they have no moral moorings to the sensible world of social order, physical health, and mental stability. They are lost in endless introspection and make a virtue of surrendering to passion. In their surrender, literally, is their downfall.

Falling, with its attendant sense of physical failure and shame, recapitulates the main points of my examination of mid nineteenth-century understandings of Spasmodic verse and behavior. The violence and unpredictability of a falling man, like the tumultuousness of Spasmodic poetry, threatens categories of order. The helplessness of falling echoes spasmodic medical disorders that also bypassed the will to twitch bodies in unwanted ways (see Chapter Two). In its sense of material abandonment and relinquishing of control, falling scandalizes notions of Victorian masculinity, as suggested in Chapter Three. Finally, the rupture of balance in the fall, as a moment of physical disarray, is a psychosomatic response to a world that is increasingly complex, tumultuous and fragmented.

If we look beyond the motif of falling as a way to criticize what is absurd, pathological and emasculating about the Spasmodics, however, it becomes a way to approach Spasmodic verse with an eye to intensity and passion. That is, if we take the parody of the falling Spasmodic as symptomatic of something more than critical disdain, it becomes a way of reading the Spasmodics with sympathetic attention to the very factors that have caused them to be so widely unread. Spasmodic poetry was made ridiculous by repeated critical insistence on its links to ill, nervous bodies, but we can see a way of reading Spasmodicism against the grain of this analogy when we take into account Dobell's belief, described in Chapter Two, that poetic rhythms and structures derive from the physical organization of the body. If the physicality of Spasmodic poetry is read not as pathological, but as a literary theme in its own right, we can approach Spasmodic poetry as one of the contexts for understanding mid nineteenth-century approaches to the body in literature and literary criticism.

Moreover, the metaphor of falling allows us to remember what is perhaps the most obvious things about the Spasmodics: their fall from literary grace. The Spasmodics are nearly always associated with failure. The first sentence of Richard Cronin's 2002 introductory overview of the Spasmodics in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry* confirms the persistence of the association between Spasmodic poetry and critical hand-wringing: "The Spasmodic School was christened by its detractors" (291). Cronin quotes Smith's wry observation that the term "Spasmodic," "had a nickname's best prosperity—it stuck" (291).

The weight of the unfriendly nickname pulled the Spasmodics from the pedestal of their initial popularity, certainly, but it also must be remembered that the Spasmodics made a lot of noise on the way down. Cronin draws attention to other poets' scramble to distance themselves from the unfortunate Spasmodics. Evoking Browning's rejection in "Popularity" of imitative poets who merely copy Keats, Cronin suggests that Browning had the Spasmodics in mind when he lamented the limited imaginations of "Hobbs, Nobbs, Stokes and Nokes." Cronin argues that Browning intended the rebuttal as a way of quarantining his very Spasmodic-sounding *Pauline*, *Paracelsus*, and *Sordello* from derivative Spasmodic productions. Cronin interprets Browning's "Popularity," then, as that poet's conscious strategy for distancing his poetry from the Spasmodics'. Arnold's repudiation of his own *Empedocles on Etna* is the strongest example of the literary effects of the Spasmodic backlash. Cronin explains, as I have also argued, that Arnold removed that poem from his collected works "because he had come to recognize that it might itself be recognized as a Spasmodic poem" (292). Falling from favor, for the Spasmodics,

meant that their "bad" writing was seen as a contagion wildly spreading over popular poetry.

However, the Spasmodics themselves employed the metaphor of "falling" and its alliterative counterpart "failing" in the course of their own poems, dwelling on an embodied poetics of longing and lack of control. Firstly, Spasmodic poems themselves abound in images of falling. Here I take examples from the two poems that were fixed at the center of the Victorian debate about Spasmodic poetry, *A Life-Drama* and *Balder*. Walter, raving on a bridge at night after committing a moral indiscretion with his host's daughter, experiences his fall from grace in literal terms: "O, if she had proclivity to sin / Who did appear so beauteous and so pure, / Nature may leer behind a gracious mask. / And God himself may be—I'm giddy, blind, / The world reels from beneath me" (*A Life-Drama* 135). Balder, gathering resolve to euthanize his mad wife, attempts to stand, but faints instead:

> At length I stand.
> What, am I chained? Have I trunk-hose of lead?
> The door—the door—my limbs do help the ground
> Sucking me in . . .
> . . . Off! I will be free.
> Darkness at noon! Aye, aye, the flood swells fast.
> This lightning— [*Sinks in a swoon* . . .] 281-2.

The true moments of falling in these poems, however, are not the moments in which the characters lose their always-questionable balance, but moments in which the language, the emotional pitch, the tone, the poems themselves, become dizzying.

Balder is composed of a series of short scenes in which, generally speaking, the emotional and poetic intensity steadily rises, often reaching a crisis. I take as my example here one of the longer of these scenes, in which Balder invites a doctor to cure his ailing wife. Most of the scene is dominated by routine poetic sentiments from Balder, celebrating Amy's beauty and goodness: "Ah, was the very air / Ethereal round her, so that whoso breathed / Revived to his best nature and grew bright / For her sake" (207). The self-consciously poetic language here, the "whoso," the initial "Ah," and the syntactical displacement of "was the very air" for "the very air was," all serve to highlight the conventional love Balder feels for his wife. Both the traditional poetics and the nature of Balder's feelings, however, are undone by Balder's maniac passion by the end of the scene. Now, he does not plead with the doctor to help his wife, but threatens him with death if he does not. The two men are standing on the ramparts outside Balder's tower study, just after the doctor has given a bleak prognosis:

Balder. Thou art a feeble man,
I am no giant, but am thrice thy match;
Cure her!
Doctor. Thou hast mine answer.
Balder. And thou mine.
Cure her.
Doctor. I cannot
Balder. In mine art I know
Passion and terrible occasion make

Men poets, poets gods. Thine may have like

Apotheosis. Cure her!

Doctor. Hands off! see

The precipice we stand on—

Balder. Ah! ah! ah!

Cure her!

Doctor. Thou jestest with me!

Balder. By the Heavens

No!

Doctor. Stand back!

Balder. Cure her!

Doctor. Free me! Mercy! Help!

We have been friends, thou wilt not murder me?

Balder. We have been lovers, but I sent a shaft

Into her heart. If thou canst draw it forth

Well; but if not—

Doctor. Nay, I can fight for life!

Madman! Hold! Murderer! Mercy! Mercy!

Balder. Cure her!

Doctor. Spare me! my wife! my children!

Balder. Cure her!

Doctor. Christ!

God! oh God!

Balder. Cure her!

Doctor. I will!

Balder (releasing him). Thou wilt NOT!

Liar! Begone! Haste! Lest in my despair

Thou 'scape not twice.

Here, Balder's passion erupts into physical violence; either man could fall, the doctor is nearly killed. Although the language retains its overtly poetic tone ("Thou jestest"), the juxtaposition between the dire emergency of the scene and the over-wrought language could easily be read as absurd. The linguistic intensity here courts parody. More importantly, the pentameter breaks down, just as the words are scattered over the page. The short, declarative sentences pulse with intensity that cannot be contained by any rhythm. The literal dizziness of the doctor, pleading for his life on the ramparts, is matched by the twitching verse. Moments of climax such as this are the driving force of the poem.

A Life-Drama, similarly, contains moments of linguistic abandonment. As I argues in Chapter Three, the poem is a tribute to sensual abandon, and Walter's yearning makes itself felt in nearly every passage. While *A Life-Drama* does not approach the restless, dire heights of Balder on the roof—its diction and rhythm emphasize sorrow rather than rage—it matches that poem in its intensity of passion. Here, that intensity lies in Walter's abandonment to sensuality. In the following passage, Walter describes a dead friend, a poet who seems based loosely on Keats:

. . . More tremulous

Than the soft star that in the azure East

Trembles with pity o'er bright bleeding day,
Was his frail soul; I dwelt with him for years;
I was to him but Labrador to Ind;
His pearls were plentier than my pebble-stones.
He was the sun, I was that squab—the earth,
And basked me in his light until he drew
Flowers from my barren sides. O! he was rich,
And I rejoiced upon his shore of pearls,
A weak enamored sea. Once did he say,
"My Friend! A Poet must ere long arise,
. . .
And as the young Spring breathes with living breath
On a dead branch, till it sprouts fragrantly
Green leaves and sunny flowers, shall he breath life
Through every theme he touch, making all Beauty
And Poetry forever like the stars." (24-25)

Walter's language is rich with alliteration and assonance. Throughout the poem, he insists upon his dead friend as the ideal poet, such as he himself can never hope to be. This trope allows him a space for yearning and desire, both after the friend, for whom his feelings border on what would later be called the homoerotic, and for "Poetry forever like the stars." Walter's metrical, physical longing is itself an abandonment to the overwhelming forces of passion and verse. He characterizes himself as passive even at the moment of composition: "he drew / Flowers from my barren sides." The

intensity of *A Life-Drama* comes from Walter's willing surrender to the seductive powers of the master poet and the master passion, Poetry itself. Walter spends most of the poem in a kind of poetic free-fall of yearning.

The motif of falling that runs through critical reception of the Spasmodics is a way to begin understanding these moments of passion in Spasmodic poems. In falling comes abandonment, absurdity, a failure of the will to stay upright, a failure of the body's ability to retain balance, a lapse in perspective. In short, falling is shorthand for all of the things I have argued that Spasmodic poetry stood for, from Smith's gendered poetics of the body weak, to the newly understood decentralization of the nervous system. Spasmodic poetry is destabilizing; it operates through episodes of dizziness. But the metaphor of falling also addresses itself to another Spasmodic phenomenon: their initial popularity. The pleasure of the free-fall, the joy of the moment of abandonment to passion, the excitement of excess—all of these help explain the popularity of the Spasmodics, as well as the backlash against them.

"Destabilizing Energies": Science, Language, and the Spasmodic Afterlife in the *Fin de Siècle*

Another way the Spasmodics have "fallen" from literary grace is in the lingering perception of their isolation from the dominant literary and cultural tones of the nineteenth century. They are often seen as a sub-category of the Romantics, a strange, sensuous departure from the organic growth of high Victorian poetics towards a more civilized, restrained ideal. Situating the Spasmodics at the fraught intersection of science and poetry, I have attempted to argue against their alleged isolation. Although a smattering of attempts have been made over the past few

decades to read the Spasmodics alongside various more canonical authors or movements (see, for example, Suzette Henke's 1972 "James Joyce and Philip James Bailey's *Festus*," Jonathan Morse's 1977 "Emily Dickinson and the Spasmodic School," or Charlotte Crawford Watkins 1958 "Browning's *Men and Women* and the Spasmodic School"), these attempts to link the Spasmodics to more well-known names rely heavily on the grammatical authority of the conjunction "and" that crops up so often in their titles, sturdily yoking one canonical author at a time to the Spasmodic tradition. However, the sustained effort of putting the Spasmodics into the history of Victorian poetry, of listening hard to the cacophony of voices and themes that make up that rich period, requires an understanding of the ways the Spasmodics participated in, or even precipitated, central Victorian literary preoccupations. The links between science, materialism and literature is one such preoccupation. The Spasmodic investment in scientific discourses not only suggests their importance to Victorian poets, but also helps illuminate the ways Spasmodic energies still run strong in late Victorian English and French poetic movements, as scientific and technological discoveries and perspectives more and more strongly inflect ways of seeing the world. Although a detailed analysis of the afterlife of Spasmodic influence on the Victorian Decadents and Aesthetes or French symbolists is beyond the scope of this project, it is important to take time in this concluding chapter to nod to the fact that the literary trend for Spasmodicism was never concluded, that echoes of Spasmodic poetics can be heard until the end of the period and beyond. In an unpublished 1994 dissertation, Lori-Ann Paige notes,

"Spasmodicism might be described as the trunk of a spreading literary tree, rooted in Romanticism and eventually branching out into Aestheticism and Decadence" (3).

Like the Spasmodics, the Decadents and French symbolists were marked by a perceived fall from health and masculine vigor, as well as a concern for the ways in which language could represent human experience. Victorian poets such as Swinburne and Rossetti were believed to have been influenced by the Spasmodics directly. Martha Westwater, for example, persuasively argues in *The Spasmodic Career of Sydney Dobell* that Swinburne was inspired by Dobell: "[Swinburne] felt intoxicated by the richness of imagery in Dobell, by his utter abandonment to the lure of language" (142).

The "lure of language," more crucially than the lineage of influence between Dobell and Swinburne, marks the importance of the links between Spasmodic and late Victorian literature and French symbolism. In *Dark Passages: The Decadent Consciousness in Victorian Literature* (1965), Barbara Charlesworth notes that the ideal of the Decadents was "the attainment of as many moments as possible of heightened sensory experience, enjoyed within the mind outside society" (xv). In pursuit of the heightened moment, Decadent writers focused on language and expression rather than incident or object. Charlesworth quotes T.S. Eliot's description of Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads*: "the object has ceased to exist . . . because language, uprooted, has adapted itself to an independent life of atmospheric nourishment" (Charlesworth 33). The same argument, as I have suggested, was often levied against the Spasmodics: their attention to linguistic "glitter" and "fireworks" overwhelmed any sense of morale, theme, or intellectual movement in their poems.

The result, for the Spasmodics as for the Decadents, was an aesthetic that valued the body over the soul, language over meaning.

French symbolists Rimbaud, Baudelaire and Mallarmé also echo the Spasmodic elevation of sensory experience. The symbolist exploration of synaethesia, in which one sensory experience calls up another, can be seen as an extension of the incipient Spasmodic style of endless streams of images and metaphors. Although the Spasmodics did not overtly share the symbolist belief that words fail to adequately express reality, Spasmodic poetry suggests that literary realism could always be undercut by a spasm of the nerves, or a twitch of passion.

In *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy and Culture of the* Fin de Siècle *in Europe* (2002), Charles Bernheimer describes Decadence as a literary form in which "separate units are animated at the expense of the overall effect." As readers of Decadent texts, we must therefore "suspend our desire for coherent sense making" (xv). Again, these arguments clearly echo the initial reception of Spasmodic poetry, in which no "overall effect" or "coherent sense" ever interfered with processions of individual poetic images. In Bernheimer's book, as in many critiques of Spasmodic and Decadent literature, emphasis on linguistic fragments over moral cohesion suggests ill health and corrupted bodies. In an eerie coincidence, Bernheimer died before he finished *Decadent Subjects*. T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor—the editors who completed his work—speculate on the connections between death, disease and Decadence in their preface. They emphasize that Bernheimer saw Decadence as "a form that would invade and perhaps master me" and that he saw his book as "a performance from which it would be wise

for my friends to keep at a distance lest it contaminate them with destabilizing energies" (xiii). Although they are being playful, Bernheimer's editors are also telling a truth about Decadence: like Spasmodicism, it had everything to do with illness and contagion.

Barbara Spackman's 1989 *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annuzio* suggests that sick bodies were a pre-Freudian precursor to the unconscious. Instead of finding evidence of the subconscious and repressed desire in literature, *fin de siècle* literary critics saw physical symptoms produced by a body beyond the reaches of the conscious. She explains: "[a]s a critical gesture, the diagnosis of 'sickness' reduces the work of the intellect to the twitches of a body jolted by nerve spasms, poisoned by disease . . . Behind the disturbed syntax, the disturbing contents of decadent texts, there hides a diseased, degenerate body" (1). Here, the role of the body in Decadent literature is equivalent to that of the body in Spasmodic literature. The literary reception of both movements was dominantly colored by the relationship between language and the body, between an overstated richness of textuality and an implied, conscious-less, nervous body that produced discordant spasms of language. In both cases, these literary forms were invested in nineteenth-century scientific research into the body and biology as productive forces that simultaneously predate consciousness and work to shape it. The murky overlap of nerves and thoughts, brain and mind, preoccupied Decadence and Spasmodicism, and ultimately located each outside of poetic categories of "health" or "masculinity."

Gowan Dawson emphasizes the connections between biology and British aestheticism in his recent article "Intrinsic Earthliness: Science, Materialism, and the

Fleshy School of Poetry." Dawson defines Victorian "materialism" as a "fundamental proposition" that "nothing exists independently of matter, with even human consciousness being at some level a correlate of the mechanical activities of the nervous system" (114). While scientists like John Tyndall and Thomas Henry Huxley were accused, to their displeasure, of propagating materialism (as opposed to Christianity), poets such as Rossetti and Swinburne came in for the same treatment because of the emphasis on fleshy sensuality in their poetry. The argument against aesthetic poetry follows, again, the argument against Spasmodic poetry. Dawson notes that nineteenth-century poet and critic Robert Buchanan, writing under the pseudonym "Thomas Maitland," labels Rossetti's poetry "spasmodic" and "sub-Tennysonian" (Dawson 116 and Buchanan 1329). Dawson goes on to quote Buchanan's indignant explanation that "the fleshy gentlemen have bound themselves by solemn league and covenant to extol fleshiness as the distinct and supreme end of poetic and pictorial thought; to aver that poetic expression is greater than poetic thought, and by inference that the body is greater than the soul" (Dawson 117 and Buchanan 1330).

Dawson does not continue the quotation from Buchanan, which adds in the original that not only do aesthetic poets hold the body superior to the soul, but also "sound superior to sense; and that the poet, properly to develop his poetic faculty, must be an intellectual hermaphrodite, to whom the very facts of day and night are lost in a whirlwind of aesthetic terminology" (1330). While issues of masculine poetic identity are beyond the scope of Dawson's argument, it is worth noting here that a privileging of aesthetic expression over meaning translates to a radical

ungendering of the poet, casting doubt on his masculinity and leaving him "an intellectual hermaphrodite." Vavasour, the emasculated Spasmodic poet in Kingsley's *Two Years Ago* (see Chapter Three), falls victim to this system: he is effeminate because he would rather stay inside and write a nonsensical stream of disconnected metaphors about a violent storm at sea than brave the elements in a moral quest to save survivors of a sea wreck, like his prosaic and heroic counterpart Tom. Spasmodic poets were believed to be less than manly because of their concern for language over action, but they were at the same time reinforced as men because their poetic endeavors followed so closely in the footsteps of Byron, whose masculinity was unquestioned by most Victorian critics. Both hyper-masculine and effeminate, then, Spasmodic poets prefigured the sexual threat posed by the "fleshy school" just a few decades later.

Dawson goes on to suggest that materialism was threatening not only for its allegedly skewered value system, but because it "carried dangerous connotations of unBritish foreign heterodoxy [the French revolution, inspired by Enlightenment godlessness] as well as home-grown atheistic working-class radicalism" (114). Aesthetic as well as Spasmodic poets carry the taint of the foreign Other, in terms of both class and nationality. Vavasour, of course, has a French name, linking him to the spiritually corrupt excesses of French politics. Aytoun's parody of Spasmodicism, *Firmilian*, while set in Spain, includes a scene in which a Spasmodic poet explodes a church and spouts atheist rhetoric until he eventually falls from a cliff while pursued by officers of the Inquisition. Moreover, Smith and Dobell themselves hailed from working-class backgrounds.

By the end of the century, the aesthetes had inherited from the Spasmodics critical accusations of sexual, national and religious strangeness, largely because both sets of poets were understood to be invested in the sensuality of language rather than the logic of morally sound philosophy. As Dawson puts it, "the contemporary disputes over the immorality of contemporary literature and the materialism of modern science can be seen to intersect and overlap with each other" in such a way that the biological concerns of science translated into metaphysical impurities in poetry (115). As a result of the "overlap" between scientific and literary discourses that Dawson describes, "matter" or "language" and "spirit" or "morality" became hardened opposites in literary criticism at the same time as science suggested that consciousness and the physical structures of the body were always already entwined. Poetry was incoherent, immoral, sexually perverse and threatening to national identity to the same extent that it was perceived to indulge in a materialist aesthetic that emphasized sensual language and sensory response. The Spasmodics, and later the poets of the *fin de siècle*, fell foul of this critical trend when they investigated in verse the limits of language to represent sensual experience and the limits of conscious will to control the unruly body. The perceived immorality and sensuality of all of these poets links the stories of their critical reception through the course of the nineteenth century.

The Science of Pleasure

E.S. Dallas, a nineteenth-century literary critic, made an impressive attempt in *The Gay Science* (1866) to bring together science and literary criticism. An early

structuralist, Dallas sought to unite the emotionally-charged and dissonant field of literary criticism with the promptings of scientific research. To do so, he left behind the rhetoric of moralism and faith that had dominated the reactions of literary critics like Buchanan, Kingsley and Aytoun. Instead, Dallas lays out a systematic criticism based on pleasure. Dallas's two-volume work is an important context for understanding the Spasmodics because it touches on several of the key Victorian issues that existed parallel to the debate over Spasmodicism; namely, science and the emerging importance of the unconscious. Additionally, Dallas's central theory that pleasure is the goal of poetry provides a counterpoint to critical views of the Spasmodics mobilized by Buchanan, Aytoun and Kingsley, views that neglect the pleasure of Spasmodic verse in favor of its moral failings and its ill-suitedness to projects of empire.

For Dallas, in order for criticism to be effective, it must operate as a science, with known laws and carefully examined guidelines. Dallas argues that science has given us great knowledge, from the stately triumph of the Crystal Palace, to the printing press, to the laws of astronomy. We must approach literary criticism in the same spirit, investigating the effects of art on humanity as a naturalist dissects sea-creatures. However, Dallas is careful to differentiate between science and art, arguing that the end of science is knowledge, but the end of art is pleasure. Therefore, a "science of criticism . . . must of necessity be the science of the laws of pleasure, the joy science, the Gay Science" (1: 6).

Dallas anticipates that there will be some difficulty in accepting pleasure as the ends of art: "Here, however, care must be taken that the reader is not misled by a

word. Word and thing, pleasure is in very bad odour; moralists always take care to hold it cheap; critics are ashamed of it; and we are all apt to misunderstand it, resting too easily on the surface view of it as mere amusement" (1: 89). If critics are or were "ashamed of pleasure," this goes a long way to explaining the reasons the Spasmodics were so critically reviled. Indeed, the language of shame surrounds the critical reception of the Spasmodics: they were alternately shameful in their bodily failures, shameful in their self-indulgent introspection and passions, shameful in their feminized passivity. On the other hand, they could also be spectacularly shameless, falling into reveries of impassioned longing with masochistic abandon. A ghost thesis of this dissertation has been that pleasure is aligned with shame, that pleasure is the reverse side of shame (see Chapter Three). The image of the falling poet crystallizes this alignment by combining the shame of absurd physical failure, the shamelessness of losing oneself in pained desire, and the tingling pleasure of abandonment.

Dallas goes on to associate pleasure with the unconscious, locating the bulk of his investigation and the site of his inquiry beyond the knowable: "Now art is a force that operates unconsciously on life. It is not a doctrine, it is not a science. There is knowledge in it, but it reaches to something beyond knowledge. That something beyond science, beyond knowledge, to which art reaches, it is difficult to express in one word" (1: 90). The word Dallas settles on is pleasure: "What then is . . . the end of art? . . . life ignorant of itself, unconscious life, pleasure" (1: 90). Pleasure, for Dallas, evokes this unconscious life:

> . . . [T]he artist appeals to the unconscious part of us. The poet's words, the artist's touches, are electric; and we feel those words, and

> the shock of those touches, going through us in a way we cannot define, but always giving us a thrill of pleasure, awakening distant associations, and filling us with a sense of mental possession beyond that of which we are daily and hourly conscious (1: 334).

Dallas's term for the space beyond knowledge to which pleasure addresses itself is "the Hidden Soul." The Hidden Soul is the domain of pleasure, instinct, intuition, and the "blind, unconscious force" of passion (1: 237). It amounts to "an immense involuntary life" outside of consciousness (1: 220). Quoting Shakespeare, Dallas writes: "Our little life is rounded with a sleep; our conscious existence is a little spot of light, rounded or begirt with a haze of slumber, dimly-lighted and like a visible darkness, but full of dreams and irrepressible activity, an unknown and indefinable, but real and enjoyable mode of life—a Hidden Soul" (1: 251).

Access to the Hidden Soul is limited. Trying to rouse it is pointless; the effort itself dooms the attempt to failure. It must be woken for us, by art, by pleasure. In the free play of imagination or the grip of a great passion, we can feel its presence. The mysticism and poetry of Dallas's theories at this point exist side-by-side with science. Dallas turns to medical science to justify his elevation of the unconscious. The Hidden Soul is underwritten by "the same sort of power as that which the brain exerts in secret over the whole body." Dallas explains that "the brain keeps guard over the various processes of the body—as the beating of the heart and the breathing of the lungs" (1: 243). Dallas's remarkable turn to the inner working of the body as an explanation for pleasure and the appeal of poetry in fact replicates the work of

contemporary scientists, who looked to the nervous system and the de-centralized body to explain mental phenomenon.

For Dallas, poetry is appealing mainly because it can address the Hidden Soul. Art activates pleasure through secret channels that can nonetheless be compared to the ways the brain works quietly over the body. But the system only operates if one remains unaware of it. Imagination gets its strength "in the absence of control, in the vagrancy of spontaneous movement, in the freedom from supervision" (1: 260). As in the case of Marshall Hall's Excito-Motory System (see my Chapter Two), which he believed exercised unconscious control over the body, there are "certain powers moving within us, we know not what, we know not why—instincts of our lower nature, intuitions of the higher, dreams and suggestions, dim guesses, and faint, far cries of the whole mind" (Dallas 1: 246). Dallas refers to imagination as an interaction of the highest and lowest bodily functions, our animal selves as well as our Christian souls, while Hall defines the Excito-Motory System as explicitly relevant only to bodily functions. However, both men, the biological and the literary scientist, are interested in the same realm: the unconscious. Like Hall, Dallas looks for significance beyond our will and self-control: "[t]here is a vast and manifold energy, spontaneously working . . ." (1: 246).

The way to ruin pleasure and send the Hidden Soul ever deeper into hiding, argues Dallas, is through self-consciousness. If we pay attention, we wake from the trance: "[a]nd as when you wake the somnambulist to reason you render him incapable; so when you teach the savage that lives by instinct to think, you make him stupid" (1: 241). In this, Dallas agrees with literary critics like Arnold and Kingsley

who find excessive introspection enervating and dangerous. Raising the specter of lameness and national decrepitude, Dallas notes "[t]he individual feels how thought cripples him; the nation feels how discussion cripples it; and we are keenly sensitive to the lameness thus produced" (2: 300). Dallas's "lameness" is a metaphor for the weakening effects of solipsism. In the cult of self-consciousness, he sees in fact a sea change in literary history. He feels the nineteenth century to have entered the age of biography, in which examination of character and self becomes dominant. Dallas suggests, and Kingsley and Arnold would probably despairingly agree, that classical art concerned itself with public life, while contemporary art concerns itself with private. The result is a lack of interest in the public hero, the hero of state, and a growing concern for the individual in all his flaws and daily realities.

Certainly the Spasmodics, with their deliberately flawed and pathetic poet-heroes, are implicated in this shift: their poet-heroes attempt to write great poems that will rejuvenate the age, but they always sink instead into introspective gloom. Spasmodic poems can be read as a dramatization of self-consciousness's seductive appeals and moral dangers. Despite Dobell's explicit awareness that *Balder*'s "egotistical, self-contained" hero represents "a predominant intellectual misfortune of our day" (Dobell, *Poetical Works* 2: 4-5), most contemporary critics read the Spasmodics as symptomatic of a crippling turn to solipsism, failing to see them as crucially invested in the nineteenth-century question of self-awareness and artistic production.

Dallas's difference from Kingsley, Aytoun and Arnold is that he, a self-styled scientist of pleasure, does not criticize the turn to introspection. For him, the literary

shift to the individual is on the same level as other scientific developments, the railway or the printing press (2: ch. XVII). Although his metaphor of the cripple suggests that he finds overwrought introspection as potentially ruinous as these other critics, Dallas is writing as a scientist, and thus he claims objectivity and refuses overt judgment. In reference to art's growing concern for the individual over the public hero, which he sees as productive of too much introspection if taken to extremes, he concludes, in the last pages of the last volume: "It would be to find phrases laudatory of this movement—easy to find phrases condemning it. But it is idle to praise or blame such a movement while it is yet unfinished. All that we can do with any profit is to watch it—to deepen our consciousness of it—to feel the force of the current on all sides—and to see as clearly as possible where we are drifting" (2: 309).

According to Dallas, we are "drifting" towards a poetics of sensation. The popularity of fiction that produces sensation, for Dallas, is symptomatic of an age preoccupied with the self. Although Dallas criticizes sensation novelists for depending too much on "unnatural" means in their plots involving immoral women (2: 297), he suspends moral judgment on the quest for sensation, as "[t]he demand for sensation is but the reaction from overwrought thinking" (2: 300). The Spasmodics seem part of Dallas' definition of sensation literature. Like the sensationalized body I discussed in Chapter Four, they are of the modern world, symptomatic of its highest development, and emblematic of the most recent shifts in literary taste. At the same time, they are animalistic in their recourse to the brute body. That is, their verse is torn between seemingly unconscious bursts of feeling—spasms—and the heightened

self-consciousness that both calls the legitimacy of their intensity into question and produces the very spasms that mark that intensity.

Dallas, then, allows us to see the self-consciousness of the Spasmodics and the nervous material and linguistic spasms that disrupt such consciousness on the same continuum, as flowerings of a particular moment in literary history. Thus he provides a way to read the Spasmodics as having access both to pleasure and the defeat of pleasure, the Hidden Soul and the self-reflective consciousness that blots it out. The critical tendency to relegate the Spasmodics to the fringes of nineteenth-century poetry, to see them as failures and absurd aberrations, misses their participation in the growing literary trend toward subjectivity and particularity. In their concern with the body and the ways the discourse in and surrounding their work flirts with material disorder, and in their condition as modern poets reacting to a modern world of self, technology, science, the Spasmodics are central to nineteenth-century literary development.

Invalids and suicides play a central role in Dallas's theories. The pathological extreme of introspection, he writes, is suicide. This is because pleasure recedes at the same rate as self-knowledge encroaches. Too much of the latter destroys the former, and the subject is trapped. The only people who really understand health, for Dallas, are invalids who, because they are aware they do not have it, stand as a contrast to the healthy subject who is unaware of his pleasure in health. The healthy subject has another advantage, intimately linked to pleasure: the capacity for action. Dallas spends much of Volume II in a scientific investigation into the laws of pleasure, as other scientists might investigate the laws of energy. For Dallas, these two "laws" are

related: "action is the prime law of pleasure" (2: 39). Pleasure is produced by energetic movement, by movement that may not be well-reasoned, or even well-principled. Action, regardless of motive, is the key: "And so we advance a step towards the science of pleasure in ascertaining that the first condition of it is a rush into activity" (2: 39). The nature of the activity is beside the point: "So sure is this rush into movement of producing pleasure that it succeeds even if it be but a rush through a succession of pains and hardships" (2: 39).

Nothing much, of course, happens in Spasmodic poems. Action is distinctly lacking. But this is only on the level of plot. Dallas's scientific dissection of pleasure reveals that action need not be consciously decided upon to bring pleasure: his headlong "rush" of activity is more indebted to the logic of galvanization and subject-less energy than it is to reasonable and willed decisiveness of action. The popularity of sensation fiction operates on these principles: the extremity and rapid pacing of their plots provide a universe of nearly ceaseless action. Spasmodic poetry seems the opposite. It tends to dwell on interior rumination, moments of personal contemplation only occasionally punctuated by dramatic crises. However, the textual spasms of Spasmodic poetry, as well as the material spasms of the spasmodic patient, can be read as miniature actions themselves, related to pleasure through the submerged circuits of nervous energy. Thus, although Spasmodic poems are implicated in the crippling cult of introspection, they are also marked textually by an energy that defies this solipsism and provides puncture points of pleasure throughout texts that are otherwise exiled by their excessive self-consciousness from the joys of the Hidden Soul. Galvanized into action by the unchanneled poetic energy coursing through the

poet-heroes, Spasmodic poems and s/Spasmodic bodies tremble with action and pleasure that is immediately foreclosed by their return to incapacitating self-awareness. In this way, Aytoun, Arnold and Kingsley read the Spasmodics as crippled and enervated, always in the state of falling. At the same time, Dallas's definition of pleasure in action provides a way for us to read the "rush" of falling as a pleasurable abandonment (see Smith above) or an exciting escalation of energy (see Dobell above).

Dallas's metaphor of the cripple as the state of the State evokes critical definitions of the Spasmodics as invalids and invalidating to empire. For Dallas, the disabled know more about health than anyone else, only because they don't have it. Similarly, the Spasmodics, more than any other group of nineteenth-century poets, write about writing poetry. Their awareness of the project in which they were immersed renders them incapable of producing anything coherent, as in the case of Balder, or simply dead with the effort, as in the case of Gerald. Poetry does not coincide with health in any of these poems, and the more they try to write the more "crippled" they become. Walter and Balder define poetry as a kind of unconscious gesture, related to a calling beyond the pale of memory or logic, but neither of them have sustained access to this "Hidden Soul." Balder sees that "the lives of other men / . . . move in apt and duteous signs, / That look like cause and consequence." But, " . . . life hath been to me a strange wild dream" (15-16). Balder's poetic aspirations lift him above the lives of ordinary men, into an air charged with mystery. At the start of the poem, he finds the time right for the production of his masterpiece: " . . . earth and air / are full of signs . . My prophetic heart / Confirmed the omen" (18-19). Yet,

although he spends several hundred pages trying, Balder produces nothing out of his awareness but a growing madness and sense of failure. Eventually, he disconnects himself from his poems. At the end of the poem, he speaks to his "scrolls": "Thou material soul, / Thou uncontained dimension, thou dead self, / Which art not I, and shall perhaps revive / When this I am is naught . . ." (285). His farewell act is to put his verse aside, hoping that it will gain power from its disentanglement with his stalled self.

Walter defines the poet as one whose "nature" is "to blossom into song, as 't is a tree's / To leaf itself in nature" (18). Yet, he spends most of the poem in a dream-state of self-reflection, speaking of his longing to write without actually writing:

> My life was a long dream; when I awoke,
> Duty stood like an angel in my path,
> And seemed so terrible, I could have turned back
> Into my yesterdays, and wandered back
> To distant childhood (158).

Here Walter has a choice between becoming an active, productive member of society, under the sway of morally-sanctioned duty, or regressing into the self to the point of infantalization. He becomes both a physical and economic success because he learns to value the pleasure of action and engagement over that of introspection and mourning for the flawed self: "I will throw off this dead and useless past,/As a strong runner, straining for his life, / unclasps a mantle to the hungry winds" (141). Casting aside the past that kept him in a constant cycle of mourning and limited his abilities to compose, Walter finds access to the Hidden Soul: "A mighty purpose rises large and

slow / From out the fluctuations of my soul." This "mighty purpose," followed purposely and athletically, leads him to riches, marriage and pleasure.

Despite Walter's success, the self-abnegation of the suicide and the self-abandon of the falling man mark the critical reputation of the Spasmodics. The over-arching drama of Spasmodic poetry is the pull in their poetry between the destructive appeal of egotism and the unconscious ripples of galvanized energy that pierce it. These pressures of the conscious and the unconscious, the will and the decentralized physical body, were all central to Victorian understandings of biology, modernity and literary history. This is the double-bind of Spasmodicism, that it is at once about pleasure and shame, about self-awareness and the insurgence of the unconscious self, the evolved modern body and the brute prehistoric body. The absurd Spasmodic poet-hero, toppling into the mud or off an Italian cliff, is undone by these conflicting forces, forces that defined mid-nineteenth-century poetry.

Postscript:
A note on the Winter 2004 *Victorian Poetry* Special Edition on the Spasmodics

Contributors:
Tucker, Herbert F. "Glandular Omnism and Beyond: The Victorian Spasmodic Epic
Rudy, Jason R. "Rhythmic Intimacy, Spasmodic Epistemology"
Blair, Kirstie "Spasmodic Affections: Poetry, Pathology, and the Spasmodic Hero"
Hughes, Linda K. "Alexander Smith and the Bisexual Poetics of *A Life-Drama*"
Harrison, Antony H. "Victorian Culture Wars: Alexander Smith, Arthur Hugh Clough, and Matthew Arnold in 1853"
Laporte, Charles "Spasmodic Poetics and Clough's Apostasies"
Mason, Emma "Rhythmic Numinousness: Sydney Dobell and 'The Church'"
Boos, Florence S. "'Spasm' and Class: W.E. Aytoun, George Gilfillan, Sydney Dobell, and Alexander Smith"

When I began this project two years ago, the Spasmodic poets of the 1850s barely registered in modern literary studies. Today, it would not be an exaggeration to say that they have, characteristically, exploded onto that scene. The recent special edition of *Victorian Poetry* (published Winter 2004; distributed February 2005), edited by Jason Rudy and Charles Laporte, speaks to the sudden interest in this long-maligned school. Including essays on the Spasmodics and medical science, the Spasmodics and rhythm, the Spasmodics and the epic, the Spasmodics and culture, the Spasmodics and class, the Spasmodics and gender, and the Spasmodics and religion, this special edition approaches the Spasmodics from a multitude of angles both familiar and unprecedented.

Laporte and Rudy attribute recent interest in the Spasmodics to the collapse of the canon and the influence of postcolonial and Marxist studies, which allow us to notice the Spasmodics as working-class and Scottish. In my Introduction, I suggest that emergent interest in the Spasmodics is indebted to queer studies, feminism, and interdisciplinary studies between science and literature. Reading this fascinating new

special edition, however, I am struck by yet another reason for the appeal of the Spasmodics. The essays in *Victorian Poetry* cast the Spasmodic net wide: the Spasmodics (including all the usual suspects, as well as Tennyson, Emily Brontë, both Brownings, Clough and Arnold, William Morris, the sensation novelists, Rossetti, and Swinburne) are contextualixed in a remarkable array of literary, political and cultural movements. These poets are alternately experimenting in form (Tucker) or embodied rhythm (Rudy), questioning mid-century gender roles and probing bisexuality (Blair, Hughes), participating in the literary and cultural debates over the intersections of poetic style, education and class in the 1850s (Harrison), exploring questions of religious conviction and ways of representing metaphysical curiosity in verse (Laporte), championing a radical religion of inclusivity through an experimental poetics of embodied emotional response to divinity (Mason), and finally attacking established notions of class boundaries (Boos). "Spasmodic," interestingly, is defined in very different ways by each of these critics. In explicating the ways Spasmodic poets use meter to embody emotion, Rudy uses "Spasmodic poetry" as equivalent to "rhythmic experiment." For Laporte, who is interested in Clough and Arnold's debates over what constitutes good poetry, "Spasmodic poetry" comes to mean "formlessness." Thus, "spasmodic" is either an experiment in meter or a lack of it, while for Mason "Spasmodic," more conventionally, stands in for "intensity" (in this case religious) and for Hughes it signals desire (in this case homoerotic). In Boos' and Harrison's essays, spasms signify transgression (here, of class boundaries).

Throughout the entire volume, however, one consistent definition of "spasmodic" echoes: Spasmodic poetry is above all democratic poetry. Spasmodic

poetry emerges as a poetics of broad acceptance, interpreted as religious tolerance by Mason, class tolerance by Boos, formal tolerance by Rudy, Laporte, and Tucker, and sexual inclusivity by Blair and Hughes. Reading this volume, I must add another, broader reason to the list of explanations for our sudden interest in Spasmodicism: it is a poetry of inclusion. For these critics, as for me, Spasmodicism is related to the body, and can be understood as, among other things, an embodied poetics. This in itself is a democratizing move: everyone has a body on which Spasmodic poetry can have its effect, whether we understand that effect as a metaphor for other, technological modes of transmission (Rudy offers the telegraph), or as best refracted through sexual or religious feeling, or understood as a passionate throb against socioeconomic restriction. My point is that Spasmodic poetry invites an inclusive kind of scholarship, allowing critics to explore nearly endless contexts for understanding what the visceral intensity of a spasm signifies. This is not to criticize, nor to privilege one interpretation: we ought to cast the net wide, we ought to explore all venues for understanding a "new" literary phenomena. The remarkable thing, to me, is that the fecundity, both alarming and appealing, that contemporary critics found in Spasmodic poetry still moves scholars today, still inspires a kind of metaphorical, allusive, inclusive epistemology.

The evocativeness of the term "spasmodic," matched by the proliferation of metaphors, meters and images in Spasmodic poetry itself, allows us in our critical writing to move between genres and disciplines, alternately defining "Spasmodic" against the sensation novel, the epic, the lyric, nonfiction medical texts, Romanticism, and early Modernism. As for *A Life-Drama*'s Walter, who believed every experience

should produce " . . . Beauty / And Poetry forever, like the stars," Spasmodicism is appealing to us because it can do so much, hold so many meanings at once (Smith 333). This speaks both to the richness of the term "spasmodic," with all of its shades of materialism, passion and cadence, and to the energies embodied in Spasmodic poetry.

The Spasmodics, then, are appealing today for the same reason they were appealing (and upsetting) in the 1850s: their poetry opens more doors than it closes. Remarkably tolerant of formal, sexual and metrical experimentation, Spasmodic poetry also lends itself to a variety of critical lenses. Scholars in emergent fields such as disability studies and interdisciplinary literary/medical studies can find something here as surely as those studying genre, multiculturalism, feminism, queer theory, or versification. Everybody is invited in. While a poetics of inclusivity may have been threatening to some Victorian critics (as Boos, Harrison, and Laporte point out), it is a familiar and morally respected move in today's literary and cultural climate.

I'd like to briefly turn to some of the most engaging arguments in this new volume—particularly those that center around physicality and gender. Blair, like me, argues that Spasmodic poetics encode "considerable anxiety about the interaction between spasms, illness, and femininity" (474), especially because spasms indicate that "bodily actions lie outside . . . [conscious] control" (476). I draw attention to her essay as a contribution to the scholarship that links Spasmodicism with physical pathology. Blair argues, as I do, that Spasmodicism was held to be feminizing in its insistence on physicality and longing. She analyzes *Aurora Leigh* to describe how

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, as a woman, was culturally and medically seen as "naturally" conversant with embodied weakness and surrender to passion, and was thus "among all these [Spasmodic] poets" singularly "able to envisage a successful poetic hero . . . who manages to write an epic poem and, in the end, conduct a passionate relationship without going mad, dying, or resorting to violence" (486). That is, Browning succeeded where Spasmodic poets failed; those male poets were ultimately defeated by the ways their poet-heroes were unable to successfully negotiate their spasms, whereas Browning was not threatened by the association between medical spasmodicism and effeminacy. I find Blair's reading of *Aurora Leigh* persuasive and rich, especially because it considers ways Spasmodicism might have been negotiated consciously by female poets. My focus in this dissertation, however, has been on what she perceives as the failure of Smith and the other Spasmodic poets to "overcome" their spasmodic twitches. Blair sees the Spasmodics as victims of medicoliterary Spasmodicism to the extent that none of them, as effeminized men, were able to write a poem in which no one "go[es] mad, d[ies], or resort[s] to violence." I see the Spasmodics not so much as victims of a disease that destroyed their efforts but as themselves created by and invested in the struggle of working out a masculine poetic identity inflected with emotional affect and embodied passion. Nonetheless, I place my work alongside hers in our mutual effort to locate the Spasmodics at the crossroads of evolving ideas about gender, physicality and feeling in the mid-nineteenth century.

Hughes also fruitfully positions the Spasmodics at these crossroads. Her essay is an excellent reading of Smith's *A Life-Drama* as an experiment in "bisexual

poetics." Hughes's reading of Smith's *A Life-Drama* is similar to mine in its invocation of Judith Butler, although I use Butler's theories to suggest that Smith experiments with the constructed and provisional nature of gender, where Hughes uses her theories to suggest that Smith creates a consciously bisexual poet-hero in Walter. In the chain of sensual images that form the poetic economy of *A Life-Drama*, Hughes convincingly finds a bisexual aesthetic of desire without fixed object, especially as those erotic images often describe assertive women and passive men within the poem. My own reading of Smith's poetics is sympathetic to Hughes' in that we both find in it an "unconventional narrative of gender and sexuality" (504).

Hughes goes on to argue that Smith's bisexual poetics also allow him to "perform Byronism" and thereby suggest that poetic genius is not organic, but a self-conscious market-place creation (492). In Hughes' formulation, the persistent equation of Smith with Byron's sexual transgressions and the Romantic emphasis on lush, affective imagery implies that Smith's initial popularity had as much to do with marketing as with poetic creativeness. While the extent to which Smith and Gilfillan consciously negotiated these similarities in the name of profit remains unclear to me, Hughes' reading of Spasmodic marketing points in fruitful directions for future studies of the Spasmodics.

Like my dissertation, Rudy's essay describes Spasmodic poetry in the light of "an insistently physical understanding of the human body and its experience of the world" (455-6). Employing Dobell's ideas (also described in my Chapters One and Two) on rhythm as an organic expression, Rudy argues that the Spasmodics used meter to communicate feeling. The keystone of this theory is transmission: the

Spasmodic used their "rhythmic epistemology" to express embodied emotion that is felt by readers who sway to the sometimes troublingly irregular beats of Spasmodic poems. In this way, a kind of physically inscribed affective knowledge is shared between poet and reader.

Rudy's dominant metaphor is the telegraph: "[l]ike a telegraph clerk who comes to understand a message through the experience of long and short electrical impulses, or Morse code, the human brain encounters and comes to understand the surrounding world through the rhythmic impress of sensation on the physical body" (455). In this model, spasms are the Morse code of a new, radically embodied epistemology. However, Rudy's understanding of the Spasmodics depends, like the telegraph, on the idea that Morse code is legible, that meter encodes legible bursts of knowledge that travel unencumbered from creator to consumer. In one sense, the spasms of Spasmodic poetry do exactly this: they communicate strong emotion through emphatic rhythms. I would argue, though, that in relying on technology as his guiding metaphor, Rudy ignores the way that spasms, medically and biologically understood, figure as pathological impediments to communication. In the work I have quoted from Maudsley, Bell, Hall and Bain (see Chapter Two), spasms disrupt the electrical impulses of the body. Spasms suggest a sudden interruption of the body's communication with itself, they trouble the notion of the body as knowable and embodied emotion as a willed, recognizable, or meaningful. Rudy defines spasms as metrical irregularities that communicate embodied affect in ways that are all the more bold for violating established poetic meters. At the same time, he also wants spasms to represent a clean, technological method of transmission that depends upon

rendering these irregularities predictable and broadly legible. That is, he defines spasms as both irregular, spontaneous bursts of feeling and as a decodable, consciously-deployed alphabet. Although he suggests that Spasmodic poetry disturbed critics because they "simply did not know how to read rhythmically irregular poetry" (451), at other places in his essay he equates spasms with the overtly legible rhythms of electric technology. Rudy does note that "the analogy between rhythm and the electric telegraph breaks down" when readers find themselves unable to decode the personal and unique messages sent from one body to another, but the fault here lies with those who "misread" or "entirely fail to read" the unconventional Morse code delivered by Spasmodic poetry (467). Rudy does not question the notion that spasms were ultimately willed acts at communication. Although, of course, Spasmodic poets were trying to communicate an experience of the world to readers (as, arguably, are all poets), Rudy's move towards technology and away from biology allows him to ignore the messier, less predictable and more threatening side of what nineteenth-century medical and literary scholars meant by "spasmodic."

Throughout this dissertation, I have paid attention to the metaphors critics use to discuss the influence of the Spasmodics—infiltration, contagion, taint—and the language they use to describe Spasmodic poetry—bombast, excessiveness, purposeless intensity. A similar metadiscursive reading of this special edition shows the persistence of these metaphors and that language. Here I turn my attention particularly to Tucker, Harrison, and Boss. Tucker argues that Spasmodicism was a "Victorian human-potential movement" that operated on the principle that all

experience, being experience, is good, and ought to be represented in verse (430). While the epic seemed the proper generic choice for such encompassing, grandly large poetics, the lyric burst of feeling was the dominant mode of Spasmodicism; thus Spasmodic poetry is a self-referential, post-Romantic collection of lyric moments strung together to make a particular brand of Victorian epic. Tucker is very clear about the aesthetic worth of the Spasmodic epic: Spasmodic poetry "inevitably vulgarized" Romantic interest in personal feeling and creativity (429), and while "[i]t is tempting to dismiss such glandular poetics as the literary equivalent of gin" we must "remember our Victorian political economy and maintain a due regard for the fascination of what's cheap" (431). While Tucker believes that Spasmodic poetry added an interesting chapter (or, more likely, footnote) to the development of the British epic, he relies on the old, value-laden language of Spasmodicism as an "infiltration into the mid-Victorian canon" (442). For Tucker, Spasmodicism is a corrupting and feminized temptation to more sober poets. Arnold flirts with it: first, with *Empedocles on Etna*, he "received the kiss of the spasmodic Muse," then, in the withdrawal of that poem, he goes from "court[ing]" the Spasmodic siren to "reprobat[ing] her blandishments" (442).[1] Nineteenth-century suspicion that the Spasmodics were tainted with an enervating brand of sexual indulgence is quite alive here. Tucker combines medical, military, and pathological metaphors in his description of the rest of Arnold's career, as that poet "relapse[es]" into Spasmodicism, "recuperate[s]," eventually "amputate[s]" the infected Spasmodic limb, although "at the cost of his development as a poet" (442). The diseased

[1] Note that Tucker, unlike most other modern critics, does not capitalize "Spasmodic," thereby devaluing its literary worth.

materiality of the Spasmodic contagion has long been a concern to critics who elided physical with aesthetic corruption.

Tucker, in a move that is familiar from my readings of most modern critics' attempts to redeem some aspect of Spasmodicism, ends by suggesting that a more canonical poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning in *Aurora Leigh*, makes good on Spasmodicism by "reinvok[ing], critiqu[ing], and thereby transcend[ing]" it (443). *Aurora Leigh* stands against Spasmodic poetry as a successful version of their attempts at epic making because she is more aware than Spasmodic poets were of the political aims of her work (she uses Spasmodic intensity as an appeal for women's rights and women's poetry—an argument Blair also invokes), and because she, as opposed to the Spasmodics, is conscious of her efforts to include in her epic "[m]arital, national, biblical, apocalyptic, and forensic" poetic modes (443). Thus, for Tucker (and Blair), poetic worth turns on the familiar hinge of the will: Barrett Browning does it better because she knows what she's doing, where the Spasmodics, in a recasting of the Victorian medical and literary perspectives that described them as singularly lacking in will, had no recourse to self-awareness and were merely afflicted with the spasms that a superior poet so artfully employs.

Harrison, whose hostility to Spasmodicism in *Victorian Poetics and Romantic Poems: Intertextuality and Ideology* I describe in Chapters One and Three, similarly employs an inherited language of critical scorn. Harrison, like me, establishes Smith at the center of a literary debate that amounted to a culture war in the mid-nineteenth century. He pits "culture," as represented by Arnold's longing for disciplined, classical poetics, against "sensation" as represented by the Spasmodics' penchant for

writing impassioned, disjointed verse. Although I agree with Harrison that Smith was central to the poetic debates of the 1850s, I hesitate to take sides against Smith's poetics of sensation as pointedly as Harrison does. For Harrison, as for numerous nineteenth-century critics, Smith's major sin is his layering of metaphor upon metaphor: "[t]he accumulation of metaphors here," he notes of a passage from *A Life-Drama*, is "about to topple, like a tower of legos built without an adequate foundation" (514). He describes Smith's poetry as "rant," declaring that "[t]o the modern eye and ear . . . Smith's blank-verse story . . . will likely appear inchoate, childish, and cloying" (512). Like Kingsley, who found moral fault with Smith's use of metaphors to link fundamentally incompatible objects, Harrison finds aesthetic fault with Smith's "intoxication with figures of speech" which "serve primarily to confuse, rather than delight, the modern reader" (514). Coventry Patmore, similarly, complained about the disorienting experience of reading Spasmodic poetry a century ago: such reading is "the most distressing operation to which we have ever been under the necessity of submitting our understanding" ("New Poets" 341). Nevertheless, Harrison grudgingly concludes that the importance of the Spasmodics to the political, class and literary debates that centered on poetics in the mid-nineteenth century is such that "the moribund Spasmodic poets might well for a time be resuscitated" (519).

For Harrison and Tucker, then, Spasmodic poetry, although not very good in itself, is important for what it reveals about other Victorian topics: the development of the epic, say, or the ways that various Victorian literary critics positioned themselves in relation to questions of class, high culture, and literary production. Tucker and

Harrison find in Spasmodicism a potentially valuable piece of literary history, if one can only look past the poetry. The other authors of the special edition take a different stance, distancing themselves from the thorny questions of aesthetics and taste these two evoke. Rudy and Laporte, as editors, see themselves as resuscitators of a forgotten school, comparing their reintroduction of the Spasmodics to Gilfillan's nineteenth-century "discovery" of Jonathan Swift, John Donne, Ben Jonson and others ("Introduction" 427). While Harrison and Tucker speak from a privileged critical position of superior taste, Rudy, Laporte and others in this volume imply a superiority of understanding over Spasmodicism's original critics. Rudy and Laporte, siding themselves with Gilfillan as the Spasmodics' biggest proponent, thereby fault those critics who, as Rudy puts it, "simply did not know how to read rhythmically irregular poetry" (451).

Florence Boos most explicitly takes sides. Her essay is structured like a stage melodrama (not an unreasonable choice, given the melodramatic tone of much Spasmodic poetry). Boos's essay, a reading of the "nuances in social class in the 'Spasmodic' controversy," pits conservative Aytoun against liberal Gilfillan and describes the Spasmodics as maligned victims of the ensuing clash (554). Her essay is built around sub-headings that introduce the key players, as in a script, and give brief biographic sketches. For example:

> **Aytoun**
>
> William Edmonstoune 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. Private tutors prepared the intellectual 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. (554)

Aytoun's "abandonment" of his artistic and intellectual parents' liberal politics is all the more poignant given the economic and educational advantages granted him. In Boos' reading, Aytoun is pitted against:

> **Gilfillan**
>
> George Gilfillan (1813-1878), a minister of the United Presbyterian Church in Dundee, Scotland, struggled through his life against the constraints imposed on him by his role as a minister in one of Britain's more hidebound denominations. 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, he had little formal schooling, but read all the literature available to him, including the poetry of Wordsworth, Burns, and especially Byron. (558)

While Aytoun, with his father's help, "began a dual career as a successful criminal lawyer and part-time author," Gilfillan "set out on foot two weeks later [after his parents' death] for the University of Glasgow, too poor to afford any other conveyance" (554, 558). I don't mean to cast any doubt on Boos's very accurate version of the class differences between these men, or to suggest that such differences

were not central to their varying sympathies to the working-class Spasmodics. I do, however, want to draw attention to the ways Boos constructs these differences as personal, dramatic, and morally weighted. In her reading, Aytoun becomes the wealthy landlord who evicts the poor Spasmodics from the canon over their inability to pay the (poetic) rent. Dobell and Smith are the "principle victims" (556) of "the iron laws of class and education that Aytoun exploited" (579). Boos' melodramatic reading recapitulates the both the overstated passions of Spasmodic poetry and the theatrical flair of the public debate over their poetic merits and moralities.

Reading Aytoun's parody *Firmilian*, which all agree effectively ended the brief career of the Spasmodics, Boos concludes: "I find it hard to see anything much more than class-antagonism, jejune snobbery, and a sort of displaced self-loathing in this oddly grotesque cartoon" (558). Surely Boos has a point that *Firmilian* articulates a vision of the Spasmodics as commercially motivated and Gilfillan as a misguided fool in his attempts to look to the working classes to find a worthy poet (see my Chapter One). However, as other critics in this volume have pointed out, there were a great many other things going on in *Firmilian*, including fairly sophisticated parody and sexual commentary. For me, the most important "other" thing that *Firmilian* does, as I have argued, is make the Spasmodics laughable. Boos ends her essay predicting that the Spasmodics, like most working-class poets, are unlikely to "gain more than token entry" into the canon. However, she adds, again relying on the language of moral struggle, that the Spasmodics might find "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" (579).

I want to amend Boos' conclusion slightly. To her pale palette of sad Spasmodic colors, I would add the more raucous shades of absurdity, laughter, and spectacular failure. And I would say that the Spasmodics configured this pre-modernist palette not "in the face of," but *because of* "withering critical abuse." It should be obvious that I entirely sympathize with and participate in this special edition's recuperative efforts. I think it is crucial, however, to stop short of finding fault with, or assuming superiority to, or taking a moral stance against hostile nineteenth-century critics. *Firmilian* may well be as heavy-handed as Boos believes, but that is beside the point. Aytoun's parody did more than sink the Spasmodics: it created them as such. It ensured that we would always read Smith, Dobell, Bailey and Westmoreland as "Spasmodic," and we would always see their fate as rather appealingly dramatic. I don't want to lose the shades of absurdity and failure with which Aytoun, Kingsley, Oliphant, Patmore and others colored the Spasmodics, and recuperative efforts need not attempt to read literary history against those critics' definitions of Spasmodicism.

For this reason, although I have found literary merit in Spasmodic poetry, I remain deeply sympathetic to Harrison and Tucker's reading of Spasmodic poetics as rather absurd. I dwelt here on Harrison and Tucker's value-laden language to point out the persistence of nineteenth-century moral and aesthetic judgments (and the limitations of uncritically reproducing such perspectives), but I want to also emphasize that I appreciate Harrison and Tucker's willingness to hold onto the sense

of absurdity and humor with which many contemporary critics approached the Spasmodics. That is, perhaps the biggest reason anyone at all is interested in studying the Spasmodics is because there is nothing so appealing as the spectacular failure, nothing so human as the shamed man. My work depends upon reading the Spasmodics with their mantle of shame and failure intact, for I believe that the shame and failure imputed to them is what created them as a literary phenomenon in the first place. Why try to explain it away in the interests of understanding them better? Various critics (myself included) have turned to cultural history, medical contextualization, and class struggle to interpret the connotations of effeminacy, violent intensity, moral corruption and pathology evoked by Spasmodicism. As aesthetic criticism has fallen out of favor, we have tried to understand the nineteenth-century reaction against the Spasmodics as symptomatic of their transgressive, threatening poetics, thus displacing the crucial role that value judgments have played in the history of Spasmodic reception. Often we emerge with a clearer understanding of mid-century poetic debates, a new angle on Victorian masculinity, a new forefront in class struggle, or renewed interest in Tennyson or Elizabeth Barrett Browning as "successful" Spasmodics. Nonetheless, no matter what critical lens we employ to render the clowns of nineteenth-century poetry more respectable and meaningful, it remains evocative to think of these poets as "Spasmodic," as defined, enriched and made outstanding by the sense of unevenness, failure, pathology and shame inherent in this parodic term.

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