

SPASMODIC POETRY: ITS NATURE AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

APPROVED:

L. Robert Stevens
Major Professor

Witt Blau
Minor Professor

E. S. Clifton
Director of the Department of English

Robert B. Toulous
Dean of the Graduate School

SPASMODIC POETRY: ITS NATURE AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Gertrude Gallogly, B. S.

Denton, Texas

January, 1966

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. "SACRED VESSELS OF THE HEART": THE NATURE OF SPASMODIC POETRY	1
II. "HE SPAKE INSPIRED": PHILIP JAMES BAILEY	29
III. "OFT AN UNHAPPY THOUGHT": ALEXANDER SMITH	48
IV. "THROUGH ALL THE CIRCLING CYCLES, LOVE IS LOVE": SYDNEY DOBELL	62
V. SPASMODIC WORKS OF MAJOR VICTORIAN POETS .	76
VI. CONCLUSION	91
BIBLIOGRAPHY	93

CHAPTER I

"SACRED VESSELS OF THE HEART": THE NATURE OF SPASMODIC POETRY

A despairing group of youthful bards
Woefully seeks a world of Love:
"O Woe! Alas! For our fest'ring world
An iron-clad future looms ahead.

"Much Sin yields Good, and Knowledge, God.
God is Love, but Hate presides!
Wish for Death! But not too soon.
O Woe for man! The world is Doomed!"

The Victorian Spasmodics mourned a basically evil mundane world and searched for meaning in an often empty, faithless spiritual world. Feeling responsible for solving all of man's problems, and endowed with the conviction that they had a divinely inspired duty, they tried to describe the workings of the universe and all that it contains. With the sincerity and passion of youth, the Spasmodics expressed their feelings with a tremendously uneven style and maintained a violently emotional pitch under the weight of their task. They wrote,

. . . each word sincere,
As blood-drops from the heart.¹

¹Alexander Smith, "A Life Drama," Poems (Boston, 1854), p. 144.

Philip Bailey, Alexander Smith, and Sydney Dobell, who wrote the major part of their poetry between 1839 and 1854, are considered to be the central figures of the Spasmodic School, although it will be seen that Spasmodic elements are evident in much of the other poetry written at that time. The term "poetry" is being used in its most general sense, that is, to distinguish verse from prose, rather than to distinguish verse from poetry. Although judgments of the success of Spasmodic works are necessarily implicit throughout this thesis, it is not this writer's purpose to judge whether these Spasmodic works can be called poetry in any artistic sense. Spasmodic works are being called poetry because poetry is the label that the Spasmodics and the majority of their critics have used for describing the works.

The emphasis here is more on description than on judgment, as the Spasmodic poets are of interest to contemporary students of literature because they represent a frequently overlooked aspect of the Victorian period, not because their ideas were particularly unique or because of the degree of poetic excellence that they achieved. This thesis is designed, therefore, to define "Spasmodism," to familiarize the reader with the major Spasmodics and their works, and to show the role that the Spasmodics filled during the Victorian period in English literature.

Philip Bailey is the Victorian father of the Spasmodics, first publishing Festus, his major work, in 1839. It will be seen later that

Bailey was primarily influenced by the British Romantic poets, who in that sense also fathered Spasmodism, but since Dobell and Smith primarily looked to Bailey as a model, he can be called the father of the school. Bailey is recorded as denying this parentage in a letter which W. Robertson Nicoll and Thomas Wise quote:

"As regards the especial school of poetry to which you refer, I am only so far interested or concerned with the members of it as to acknowledge, along with both public and publicist, the generally bright colouring, pure morality, happy imagery, and exquisite similtudes manifest in one or two of their poems; but I have no sympathy with their works specially, nor with their ways."²

But despite Bailey's comments, the many stylistic and thematic qualities that Bailey, Smith, and Dobell hold in common indicate that these three men form a unified group that can be called a school.

William Edmoundstone Aytoun, a critic and professor at Edinburg, was the first (1854) to refer to Bailey, Smith, and Dobell as "Spasmodic," although the name had previously been applied by Carlyle to Byron,³ and therefore was not Aytoun's invention. The name "Spasmodic" is appropriate for these poets because of their style of writing, a style

²Philip James Bailey, "The Author of Festus and the Spasmodic School," Literary Anecdotes of the 19th Century: Contributions Towards a Literary History of the Period, edited by W. Robertson Nicoll and Thomas J. Wise (London, 1895-1896), II, 413. Hereafter cited as Literary Anecdotes.

³Mrs. Sydney Dobell, "Introductory Memoir," The Poems of Sydney Dobell: Selected with an Introductory Memoir (London, n. d.), p. xix.

characterized by excesses: an excess of words and images to express an idea, with frequent repetitions of these excesses; an excess of punctuation (by modern standards); an excess of emotion over what the subject seems to motivate; and an excess of ideas over that which can be handled effectively in any one literary work. As a vehicle for these excesses, the Spasmodics have generally chosen lengthy dramatic poems, using this form with little regard for the technical problems of drama. All of these elements of Spasmodic style become evident when one reads representative passages from their writings. Although there is some variety in the degree to which these excesses appear, they are all present in each Spasmodic's writing.

Sydney Dobell uses undisguised repetition of words more than does Smith or Bailey. Dobell writes:

This is the ecstasy!
It sheds, it sheds! The night is filled with flowers,
The viewless night, faint night, the yielding night,
The favouring night, --with flowers and happy rain!⁴

Alexander Smith generally uses repetition of the kind found in the following passage:

Might I so broaden on the skies of fame!
O Fame! Fame! Fame! next grandest word to God!
I seek the look of Fame! . . .⁵

⁴Sydney Dobell, The Poems of Sydney Dobell: Selected with an Introductory Memoir (London, n. d.), p. 233.

⁵Smith, p. 9.

Although Bailey does not repeat words within lines as often as do the other two, if the words "God," "Love," "Alas," and "Woe" were omitted from Festus, the work would be shortened considerably.

Much in the manner that they repeat words, the Spasmodics tend to become attached to images and to use them at every possible opportunity. The images range in complexity from concise similes to elaborate conceits, the conceits being predominant. Although these images are frequently pleasing, they are often only loosely related to the idea that they supposedly develop and therefore have little function in the poem. For example, in the following passage, Alexander Smith describes a beautiful lady's voice as it sounds to a poet:

One day he lay within the pleasant woods
 On bed of flowers edging a fountain's brim,
 And gazed into its heart as if to count
 The veined and lucid pebbles one by one,
 Up-shining richly through the crystal clear.
 Thus lay he many hours, when lo! he heard
 A maiden singing in the woods alone
 A sad and tender island melody,
 Which made a golden conquest of his soul,
 Bringing a sadness sweeter than delight.
 As nightingale, embowered in vernal leaves,
 Pants out her gladness the luxurious night,
 The moon and stars all hanging on her song,
 She poured her soul in music. When she ceased,
 The charmed woods and breezes silent stood,
 As if all ear to catch her voice again.⁶

Certainly such descriptions of the sympathy between woman and nature follow a long established convention in love poetry, but Smith has

⁶Ibid., pp. 40-41.

elaborated on the already elaborate convention. He is sometimes more concise in his use of imagery:

Lady! ay!
A passion has grown up to be a King,
Ruling my being with as fierce a sway
As the mad sun the prostrate desert sands.⁷

Whether elaborate or simple, however, Spasmodic imagery is most often stereotyped, a difficult thing to avoid when one is using such elements as the sun, moon, sea, and stars as main sources of images. Smith's comparison of lovers to ships is one such notably over-used image:

We twain have met like ships upon the sea,
Who hold an hour's converse, so short, so sweet;
One little hour! and then, away they speed
On lonely paths, through mist, and cloud, and foam,
To meet no more. . . .⁸

And even when a conventional symbol is treated in a unique fashion, the Spasmodist belabors the image. This is the case in Dobell's comparison of a woman to the moon:

. . . She was much like the moon
Seen in the day-time, that by day receives
Like joy with us, but when our night is dark,
Lit by the changeless sun we cannot see,
Shineth no less. And she was like the moon,
Because the beams that brightened her passed o'er
Our dark heads, and we knew them not for light
Till they came back from hers; and she was like

⁷Ibid. , p. 33.

⁸Ibid. , p. 67.

The moon, that whatsoe'er appeared her wane
 Or crescent was no loss or gain in her
 But in the changed beholder. . . .⁹

Details within the image are often elaborations of the image itself, rather than of the idea that the poet is developing. This can be seen in one of Lucifer's speeches in Festus:

The brain shall cease its life-
 Engrossing business, and the living blood,
 The wine of life, which maketh drunk the soul,
 Sleep in the sacred vessels of the heart.¹⁰

If one were to equate "words" with "blood" in this passage, he would crystalize the Spasmodics' love of language, that "which maketh drunk the soul." It is obvious throughout Spasmodic writing that these poets genuinely loved language, so much so that they could not bear to discard a single word.

In diction, as well as in choice of images, similarities can be seen between the writings of Bailey, Smith, and Dobell. As is evident in the previously quoted passages, word choice is often stilted, but at least elevated, and sometimes Biblical. There are actual prayers throughout Spasmodic work, in which Biblical or elevated language is appropriate. It sounds strange, however, to hear a young child speak in the following manner:

⁹S. Dobell, p. 267.

¹⁰Philip James Bailey, Festus (London, 1854), p. 150.

"The callow young were huddling in the nests,
The marigold was burning in the marsh,
Like a thing dipt in sunset, when He came.

My blood went up to meet Him on my face,
Glad as a child that hears its father's step,
And runs to meet him at the open porch.

I gave Him all my being, like a flower
That flings its perfume on a vagrant breeze;
A breeze that wanders on and heeds it not.

.....

Are ye around me, friends? I cannot see,
I cannot hear the voices that I love,
I lift my hands to you from out the night. "¹¹

This speech is particularly remarkable because the child is speaking from her death bed. She dies in the spirit of true Spasmodic melodrama a moment after she finishes this speech.

While diction and choice of imagery create much of the strained effect of Spasmodic poetry, the use of inverted word order, excessive punctuation, and other such straining devices is even stronger reason for calling the poems Spasmodic. It is difficult to find a page of Spasmodic poetry that does not contain at least one exclamation point; but more typically, one finds passages like the following one from Dobell's "Balder."

Roll O days into the years, and O years into the
ages, and O ages into the mystery of God!
Oh, Love, oh Life, and all ye jocund train

¹¹Smith, pp. 80-81.

Virtues and Joys, my lust Company,
 Be loud around me! Sing because I sing!
 Call each to each as I call unto you!
 Love calling unto Life,
 "Oh Life! Oh Life!"
 Life calling unto Love
 "Oh Love! Oh Love!"
 "How beautiful oh Life!"
 "How beautiful oh Love!"
 I am the sun singing behind the mountains!¹²

Large numbers of dashes create rhythmic irregularities both when exclamation points are not used, and in conjunction with them. Spasmodic use of dashes is evident in this passage from Festus:

Come, universal beauty, then,
 Thou apple of God's eye,
 To and through which all things were made--
 Things deathless--things that die.
 Oh! lighten--live before us there--
 Leap in yon lovely form,
 And give a soul. She comes! It breathes--
 So bright--so sweet--so warm,
 Our sacrifice is over: let us rise;¹³

At times, the numerous commas, semicolons, and periods also serve to create more pauses than seem necessary. This excessive punctuation, combined with frequent use of alliteration, often creates cacophony when harmony seems in order.

But harmony is seldom even a part of the tone of Spasmodic writing, as the poets do not seem to restrain any emotion that they feel. With this

¹²S. Dobell, pp. 242-243.

¹³Bailey, Festus, pp. 192-193.

excess of emotion comes conflict, which is not harmonious without a restraining force. The Spasmodics attempt to express emotion by stating its effect rather than by describing its cause. Indeed, they may not have understood its cause. Stating the effect of an emotion creates such lines as these, spoken by a lady in "A Life Drama,"

Woe's me! 't is very sad, but
 't is my doom
 To hide a ghastly grief within
 my heart.¹⁴

The reader cannot deny that the lady is sad, and perhaps he is even sorry that she is sad, but unless the reader is particularly sad when he begins reading, he does not feel her sadness. Rather than creating a mood that the reader can share, the poet seems to be asking the reader to feel pity. "When I Have Fears" by John Keats illustrates by contrast what the Spasmodic expression of emotion fails to do:

When I have fears that I may cease to be
 Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
 Before high-piled books, in charact'ry,
 Hold like rich garners the full-ripen'd grain;
 When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,
 Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
 And think that I may never live to trace
 Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;
 And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
 That I shall never look upon thee more,
 Never have relish in the faery power
 Of unreflecting love! --then on the shore

¹⁴Smith, p. 15.

Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.¹⁵

Here, the reader can feel the inevitability of death, which always comes too soon, and thus he is saddened. Rather than witnessing a melodramatic moan, he shares a dramatic moment with the poet.

The Spasmodics, too, shared many of the emotions of the British Romantic poets, but they added exuberance to already exuberant expressions of emotion, which is, interestingly, the same technique that is used in satire and thus causes Spasmodism to be an unwitting parody of Romanticism. That the Spasmodics were expressing sincere emotions is unquestionable; but it is also unquestionable that their exaggeration of romantic techniques and ideas both blurred and weakened their purposes. Since the Spasmodic poets were influenced mainly by Byron and Shelley, the term "romanticism" used in this discussion will refer particularly to the romanticism of Byron and Shelley. Perhaps Wordsworth, in his "Preface" to the Lyrical Ballads, defines a major underlying philosophy of these Romantics when he says that ". . . all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings."¹⁶ The poetry of both the Romantics and their Spasmodic followers is

¹⁵John Keats, "When I Have Fears," Selected Poetry and Letters, edited by Richard H. Fogle (New York, 1962), p. 152.

¹⁶William Wordsworth, "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads," A Grammar of Literary Criticism, edited by Lawrence Sargeant Hall (New York, 1965), p. 233.

characteristically both spontaneous and overflowing with emotion. It is important to note, however, that Wordsworth goes on to say in his "Preface,"

. . . Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.¹⁷

Thus, while much of the poetry of Byron and Shelley was emotional, it was somewhat tempered by thought. Spasmodic poetry, on the other hand, gushed forth under the impetus of divine inspiration.

Romantic glorification of the individual is evident throughout Spasmodic writing, and when this glorification is taken to the extreme, it creates the egocentric dramas that will be studied in detail in this thesis. Spasmodic writings embody all of the implications of glorification of self: stress on experience in the learning process, showing that even murder is a necessary experience if one is to know all phases of existence; hostility towards formal philosophy, for it tends to take the place of individual experience; a violent opposition to classical ideals of harmony and balance, for they place false restraints upon individual expression; and a glorification of emotion and passion, for it is of the self.

While other Victorian poets with Romantic leanings, such as Matthew Arnold, attempted to reconcile their philosophic beliefs with

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 233-234.

the jarringly changing world, searching for a new "sea of faith" or seeking happiness in the thought that "the best is yet to be," the Spasmodics comforted themselves with the belief that an undefined Genius and Immortality existed and that they possessed both of these qualities. They put their ". . . faith in the poet's mission and the sanctity of subjective impulse" without question,¹⁸ and they therefore did not formulate the serious doubts on which a workable philosophy is built. The Spasmodics sensed the loss of faith and increasing materialism of their age and reacted to it emotionally, but because the sources of their emotional reaction were never considered, this emotion clouded their philosophy rather than stimulating creative thought. While other Romantic-Victorian poets weighed Romantic precepts against their own world and thus necessarily modified them, the Spasmodics only magnified, and thus blurred Romantic precepts.

It logically follows, then, that rather than establishing a serious mystique of nature, either the same as or different from that of their British Romantic predecessors, the Spasmodics considered nature as an extremely powerful, essentially sympathetic force of vague origin; rather than questioning the nature or the source of Imagination or Inspiration, terms that are synonymous to the Spasmodic, they lauded

¹⁸Jerome Hamilton Buckley, The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture (New York, 1964), p. 62.

its existence and considered anyone who possessed this undefined quality to be a consequently undefined Genius. Man, to the Spasmodic, was basically good when his philosophic quest of the moment made him such, as when he discovered God, and he was basically evil at other times.

The high emotional pitch of Spasmodic writing, however, leads one to feel that the Spasmodics reacted to a strong external force, even though their reaction was vague and only parodied the earlier reactions of their Romantic predecessors. The stimulus for the Spasmodic reaction can be seen through an understanding of the climate of the early part of the Victorian period.

When Philip Bailey published Festus in 1839, "bold and imaginative poetry was not looked on with favor by those having literary authority."¹⁹ The Romantic period is considered to have begun its decline in 1824 with Byron's death, and to have ended in 1829 when ". . . the editor of Blackwood's challenged and killed the editor of London's Magazine in a duel."²⁰ Although these magazines represent conflicting views, they were both instruments of the British Romantics. The shocking effect of this duel "opened the way for the new Westminster Review, founded in 1824 by Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, leaders

¹⁹Alan D. McKillop, "A Victorian Faust," Publications of the Modern Language Association, XL (1925), 758.

²⁰Henry M. Battenhouse, English Romantic Writers (New York, 1958), p. 304.

of the Utilitarian movement, or Benthamism.²¹ In this philosophy, ". . . a chilly light of reason [was] applied to morals. . . . Poetry itself was called upon to make a definite concession to the gospel of utility."²² Publishers developed the attitude that poetry was not profitable, and they therefore published very little of it.²³ This attitude toward poetry was evident throughout the reign of William IV, from 1830 to 1837, and at the beginning of Victoria's reign, ". . . a period of cold reason," marked with ". . . a self-sufficiency which expressed itself in extraordinarily unemotional writing."²⁴ As Sir Edmund Gosse says, "the best that could be said of the popular authors was that they were sensible."²⁵ Henry Taylor, a leading poet at the time, expressed the then common view that in poetry, "reflection must take the place of mere 'feeling,' thought the place of imagery. Passion . . . was to be regarded as a direct danger and disadvantage."²⁶ As Greta Black observes, further development of Taylor's views ". . . would have clipped the wings of poetry and shackled imagination."²⁷

²¹ Ibid., pp. 304-305.

²² Sir Edmund Gosse, "Philip James Bailey," The Fortnightly Review, CCCCXXXI (November 1, 1902), 761.

²³ McKillop, p. 758.

²⁴ Gosse, p. 760.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 762.

²⁷ Greta A. Black, "P. J. Bailey's Debt to Goethe's 'Faust' In His 'Festus,'" Modern Language Review, XXVIII (April, 1933), 167.

The Victorian Spasmodics sensed this restraint, but would not, because of their romantic impulses, allow themselves to be restrained. Led by Philip Bailey in 1839, the Spasmodics rebelled against the cold reason of their age. Since rebellion, particularly youthful rebellion, is characterized by excess, it can be seen that Spasmodic excess stems from external, as well as from internal stimulation.

The public was obviously prepared for Bailey, Dobell, and Smith, for each poet achieved tremendous fame--suddenly--immediately following his first publication. Tennyson and Browning were still either ignored or laughed at, but the public ". . . rushed to buy copies of . . . Festus."²⁸ Though public taste soon changed to a worship of Tennyson, and thus, Bailey, Smith, and Dobell lost their popular positions, the short popularity of the Victorian Spasmodic poets was not without critical notice.

The two main critics of the Spasmodics were William Edmondstone Aytoun and George Gilfillan. The former was a Professor of Literature at Edinburg for twenty years, having written poetry and translations from German and Latin in addition to criticism;²⁹ the latter was a

²⁸Amy Cruse, The Victorians and Their Reading (Boston, 1935), p. 184.

²⁹MacKenzie Bell, "W. E. Aytoun," The Poets and the Poetry of the Nineteenth Century, edited by Alfred H. Miles (London, 1905), IV, 447-450.

benevolent, educated minister who did much to guide the tastes of the early Victorian reading public through lectures, sermons, and published critical articles.³⁰ Both critics wrote "glowing" comments about Spasmodic poetry, but while Gilfillan glowed with fatherly kindness and hope for the increasing greatness of the Spasmodics and for all poetry, Aytoun glowed with mirth; Aytoun burlesqued the Spasmodic elements that Gilfillan lauded. Aytoun tended to be objective in his criticism, in the respect that he analyzed Spasmodic poetry rather than Spasmodic poets. Gilfillan, on the other hand, was subjective, being more impressed by the poet's quantity of ". . . that warm, impulsive, childlike glow, which all men agree in calling 'heart'"³¹ and by how much he loved children than by the artistic or philosophical merits of the poetry. Gilfillan was the Spasmodics' patron saint; Aytoun was their hangman.

It must be noted that although Gilfillan was extremely kind in his criticism, he was not unprincipled. To the modern, comparatively objective and reserved literary critic, Gilfillan's comments appear at first to be those of a sentimental fool; his enthusiasm and optimism seem glib. But a more extensive reading of Gilfillan shows that he had

³⁰W. Robertson Nicoll, editor, "Introduction," Gilfillan's Literary Portraits (London, n. d.), pp. vii-xix.

³¹George Gilfillan, Gilfillan's Literary Portraits, edited by W. Robertson Nicoll (London, n. d.), p. 68.

read widely and that he was not completely indiscriminate, even though he was abundant in his praise. He recognized and hailed the merits of such figures as Shelley, Hazlitt, and Lamb at a time when other critics underrated them.³² That he eventually revised and considerably lowered his estimation of Spasmodic poetry, particularly of Dobell's "Balder," is a further indication that Gilfillan was more than a nostalgic patron.

Gilfillan's role as a Spasmodic patron, however, is the aspect of his literary career that is of primary interest here. Both Sydney Dobell and Alexander Smith, as well as many other young writers at the time, owe much of their fame to Gilfillan's support. "For about five years (1849-1854), George Gilfillan's position as a critic was one of very great influence. It may be doubted whether even Carlyle had more power over young minds."³³ Both Dobell and Smith sent many of their early manuscripts to Gilfillan and received strong encouragement, backed with flattering articles and assistance in finding publishers. Such noted figures as Carlyle, the Brontës, and George Meredith shared Gilfillan's view for a while,³⁴ but it seems likely that this agreement was the result of Gilfillan's infectious enthusiasm rather than because of common critical principles.

³²Nicoll, p. xviii.

³³Ibid., p. vii.

³⁴Ibid., pp. xi-xiii.

Gilfillan states his concept of the nature of good poetry in a lecture on Shakespeare:

The attitude of the true poet is exceedingly simple and sublime. He is not an inquirer, asking curious questions at the universe--not a tyrant speculator, applying to it the splendid torture of investigation; his attitude is that of admiration, reception, and praise. He loves, looks, is enlightened, and shines--even as Venus receives and renders back the light of her parent sun.³⁵

Gilfillan had this "attitude of the true poet" as a guiding principle in his own thought as a critic in addition to considering it as a criterion for a good poet. As has been noted before, however, William Edmondstone Aytoun was neither loving nor accepting in his role as critic and was ever lurking near. Gilfillan's reputation was damaged, along with that of the Spasmodic poets, when Aytoun published (in 1854) Firmilian or The Student of Badajoz: A Spasmodic Tragedy. Aytoun is brutal in his criticism of Gilfillan within this satiric drama, referring to him by his pen name, Apollodorus. The reader is introduced to Apollodorus through a lengthy, self-pitying monologue, ending in an encounter with a "genius":

I search for genius, having it myself,
 With keen and earnest longings. I survive
 To disentangle, from the imping wings
 Of our young poets, their crustaceous slough.
 I watch them, as the watcher on the brook
 Sees the young salmon wrestling from its egg,

³⁵Gilfillan, p. 185.

And revels in its future bright career.
Ha! what seraphic melody is this?³⁶

At this point, Sancho, a hawker of fruits and vegetables enters, singing a remarkably earthy "lyric,"

Down in the garden behind the wall,
Merrily grows the bright-green leek;
The old sow grunts as the acorns fall,
The winds blow heavy, the little pigs squeak.
One for the litter, and three for the teat--
Hark to their music, Juanna my sweet!³⁷

And here Aytoun berates Gilfillan's concept of the "true poet" as "simple and sublime," for upon hearing Sancho's song, Apollodorus says,

Now heaven be thanked! here is a genuine bard,
A creature of high impulse, one unsoiled
By coarse conventionalities of rule.
He labours not to sing, for his bright thoughts
Resolve themselves at once into a strain
Without the aid of balanced artifice.
All hail, great poet!³⁸

Thus, Aytoun combines ridicule and wit to call Gilfillan a misguided idealist and to burlesque the style of the entire Spasmodic school. Aytoun maintains this tone throughout his satiric work, mocking both Spasmodic theme and style.

Firmilian, the Spasmodic poet-hero of the drama, is consumed with the desire to gain knowledge through experience, the only way he

³⁶William Edmondstone Aytoun, "Firmilian or The Student of Badajoz: A Spasmodic Tragedy," Poems of William Edmondstone Aytoun (London, 1921), p. 334.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

will be able to write the epic poem that he has conceived, a process which is expounded by each Spasmodic poet in his major drama. The poet gains most experiences that he considers necessary just by living and feeling, but he believes that he must make a conscious effort to learn the nature of sin, or evil, in Firmilian's case because his epic is to deal with Cain. To gain this necessary experience, Firmilian plans a series of murders. First he poisons three of his old drinking companions; but he feels no change in the state of his soul as a result. He then murders thousands of people by bombing a cathedral, and pushes his oldest and dearest friend, the famous poet Haverillo, to his death. As fate would have it, Haverillo's body crushes Apollodorus when it falls. But, alas, Firmilian finds that none of his acts have fully taught him the nature of sin; he must look elsewhere to find inspiration for his great work. He looks towards mysticism, which parodies Spasmodic religious quests, and finds only danger there. He then looks in the direction in which all Spasmodics finally look, towards Love. Here, again, Gilfillan and Aytoun are in direct opposition in their estimations of Spasmodic poetry. Gilfillan says,

We rejoice . . . to recognise in our younger generation of poets--in Yendys, [Dobell] and Smith, and Bigg and Bailey-- symptoms that a better order of things is at hand, and that the principle, "the Greatest of these is Love," so long acknowledged in religion, shall by and by be felt to be the law of poetry-- understanding, too, by love, not a mere liking to all things, not a mere indifferentism, raised on its elbow to contemplate

objects, but a warm, strong, and enacted preference for all things that are "lovely and true, and of a good report."³⁹

But while Gilfillan sees the Spasmodics' concept of love as beautiful and true, Aytoun doubts their sincerity and their depth of understanding of the power and nature of love. Firmilian sees through love his portion of the universal salvation that is evident in Bailey's Festus, as will be discussed more fully later. Firmilian says,

Henceforward then, avaunt, ye direful thoughts
That have oppressed the caverns of my brain!
I am discharged from guilt, and free from blood
Which was but shed through misconceived desire!
How glorious is the lightness of the soul
That gleams within me now! I am like one
Who after hours of horrid darkness passed
Within the umbrage of a thunder-cloud,
Beholds once more the liquid light of day
Streaming above him, when the splendid sun
Calls up the vapours to his own domain,
And the great heap moves slowly down the vale,
Muttering, in anger, for its victim lost!⁴⁰

Firmilian has found the solution to his problems through love,

. . . love, love, love!--the master of the world--
.....
Love, whose strong hest all living things obey--
Love, the lord-paramount and prince of all
The heroes of the whirling universe!⁴¹

But in standard Spasmodic fashion, Firmilian feels that he must experience love to its fullest, that love of one woman, of Mariana,

³⁹Gilfillan, p. 68.

⁴⁰Aytoun, p. 348.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 347.

is not sufficiently fulfilling. He thus proposes to marry three women, for,

"It is by union that all things are sweet."⁴²

But Mariana and Lillian somehow do not feel in their hearts that they can share Firmilian's love with Indiana, who happens to be a Negress. Thus, they righteously stalk off to tell the authorities, who are their relatives, of Firmilian's cruel treatment of them. Indiana, afraid for her life, seeks comfort from Firmilian:

I shake from head to foot with sore affright--
What will become of me?⁴³

But Indiana's plight is too mundane to be of Spasmodic concern; Firmilian's thoughts are with his great work. He comforts Indiana by saying,

Who cares? Good night!⁴⁴

Any normal Spasmodic hero cannot be free of care for long, however, and turns to despairing thoughts. In the final scene of Firmilian, Aytoun uses the full strength of his satiric powers to dramatize Spasmodic despair. Firmilian is haunted through the doggerel verses of a "Chorus of Ignes Fatui" with guilt for his deeds. Aytoun's brilliant

⁴² Ibid., p. 350.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 352.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

burlesque of the shallowness of Spasmodic despair in this particular scene compels quoting from it at considerable length.

Chorus of Igués Fatui.

Follow, follow, follow!
 Over hill and over hollow;
 When a sinner's footsteps stray--
 Cheering him with light and song,
 On his doubtful path along.
 Hark, hark! The watch-dogs bark.
 There's a crash, and a splash, and a blind man's cry,
 But the Poet looks tranquilly up at the sky!

Firmilian.

Is it the echo of an inward voice,
 Or spirit-words that make my flesh to creep,
 And send the cold blood choking to my heart?
 I'll shift my ground a little--

Chorus of Igués Fatui.

Flicker, flicker, flicker!
 Quicker still, and quicker.
 Four young men sate down to dine,
 And still they passed the rosy wine;
 Pure was the cask, but in the flask
 There lay a certain deadly powder--

Firmilian.

O horror! horror! 'twas by me they died:
 I'll move yet farther on--

Chorus of Igués Fatui.

In the vaults under
 Bursts the red thunder;
 Up goes the cathedral,
 Priest, people, and bedral!
 Ho! ho! ho! ho!

Firmilian.

My brain is whirling like a potter's wheel!
 O Nemesis!

Chorus of Ighes Fatui.

The Muses sing in their charmed ring,
 And Apollo weeps for him who sleeps,
 Alas! on a hard and a stony pillow--
 Haverillo! Haverillo!

Firmilian,
 I shall go mad!⁴⁵

And Aytoun seemingly cannot resist a final, piercing blow at Gilfillan,
 for the chorus goes on to say:

Give him some respite--give him some praise--
 One good deed he has done in his days;
 Chaunt it, and sing it, and tell it in chorus--
 He has flattened the cockscomb of Apollodorus!⁴⁶

But Firmilian, now in the depths of Spasmodic despair, finds no comfort
 in this respite:

Small comfort that! The death of a shard-beetle,
 Albeit the poorest and the paltriest thing
 That crawls round refuse, cannot weigh a grain
 Against the ponderous avalanche of guilt
 That hangs above me! O me miserable!
 I'll grope my way yet further.⁴⁷

The evil in Firmilian's past haunts him even more intensely:

Firmilian! Firmilian!
 What have you done to Lilian?
 There's a cry from the grotto, a sob by the stream,
 A woman's loud wailing, a little babe's scream!
 How fared it with Lilian,
 In the pavilion,
 Firmilian, Firmilian!

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 352-353.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 354.

Firmilian.
Horror! I'm lost!--

Chorus of Ighes Fatui.
Ho! ho! ho!
Deep in the snow
Lies a black maiden from Africa's shore!
Hasten, and shake her--
You never shall wake her--
She'll roam through the glens of the Atlas no more!
Stay, stay, stay!
This way--this way--
There's a pit before, and a pit behind,
And the seeing man walks in the path of the blind!⁴⁸

Firmilian dies, never understanding or feeling with any depth, and one can understand why the Spasmodic school died with him. Aytoun uses humor, a quality that the Spasmodics notably lacked, as a weapon which left the school completely defenseless.

Aytoun's criticism, however, has more merit than humor alone; aside from ridiculing Spasmodic thought, which Gilfillan could defend on the basis of nobility of sentiment, a quality that the Victorian public at the time demanded from its poets, Aytoun showed that the defects caused by lack of restraint in Spasmodic poetry could not be overlooked. As the passages quoted above illustrate, Aytoun made a mockery of the Spasmodic stylistic excesses: their frequent over-use of rhyme, often straining or trite; their over-use of punctuation; their often irrelevant, frequently misleading, and sometimes inappropriate imagery; and their jarringly uneven meter and tone. Aytoun particularly sears the

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Spasmodic logic that produces this uneven quality in his Preface to Firmilian when he says,

I am perfectly aware that this poem is unequal, and that some passages of it are inferior in interest to others. Such was my object, for I am convinced that there can be no beauty without breaks and undulation.⁴⁹

Aytoun's use of the tragic drama as a form for his burlesque of the Spasmodic school is an additional reason for its effectiveness, for the bulky, unwieldy dramatic poem was the form favored by the Spasmodic for his presentation of the nature of the universe. Although he wrote lyrics, the lyrics were usually smothered within the bulk of verbiage of the drama. Spasmodic dramas have qualities far different than those prescribed by the classic definition of dramatic unity, for they generally cover a period of several years, oceans of space, and a multitude of action. Bailey's Festus takes the reader throughout the universe, and although Smith's "A Life Drama" and Dobell's "Balder" are confined to the earth in their settings, the poet-protagonist within each drama has as his main goal the dream of writing a vast poetical work that would encompass all of the universe. The Spasmodist virtually disregards any of the technical problems of drama in his work, using the form as a framework for the exposition of his ideas rather than using living characters to dramatize them. Each of the Spasmodic dramas has little action, almost no plot development, incredibly long speeches, and

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 296.

staggeringly abrupt changes of mood with virtually no motivation, not to mention foreshadowing. Character development is such that if the characters were not named it would be impossible to tell whether the character were male or female, educated or uneducated, five or seventy years old.

Close study of each of these dramas, with a chapter devoted to each major Spasmodic writer, will reveal similarities in ideas, in addition to form and style, of members of the Spasmodic school of poets. It will be seen that the poets shared an interest in three major themes: love, evil, and immortality. After close consideration of the Spasmodic writers in chapters two, three, and four, it will then be seen in chapter five that several well-known Victorian writers, particularly Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, have shown strong Spasmodic influence in some of their writings.

CHAPTER II

"HE SPAKE INSPIRED":

PHILIP JAMES BAILEY

Remoter sat Bailey--satirical, surly--
Who studied the language of Goethe too soon,
Who sang himself hoarse to the stars very early
And crack'd a weak voice with too lofty a tune.¹

Philip Bailey had in his manner a dignity that disarmed Edmund Gosse, a tranquility that awed William Winter, and a fire that excited Alfred Tennyson--but only for a short time. Of the enormous popularity of Bailey's Festus, Gosse says that "In many a distant home, in America even oftener than in Great Britain, a visit to some invalid's room would reveal the presence of two volumes on the bed, the one a Bible, the other Festus";² four years ago, however, Robert Birley validly devoted an entire lecture to Festus in a series that was called "Sunk Without Trace."³ Both Bailey and Festus have become

¹Robert Buchanan, Spectator, XXXIX (September, 1866), quoted in Greta A. Black, "P. J. Bailey's Debt to Goethe's 'Faust' In His 'Festus,'" Modern Language Review, XXVIII (April, 1933), 172.

²Gosse, p. 775.

³Robert Birley, Sunk Without Trace (London, 1963), pp. 172-207.

obscure, but both man and work remain significant historically.

Philip Bailey was born in Nottingham on April 22, 1816, and he died in the same place on September 6, 1902.⁴ His father, Thomas Bailey, was himself a "poet, journalist, politician, and annalist of Nottingham"⁵ and is said to have encouraged his son Philip to study literature at an early age. Philip Bailey started writing verse when he was ten years old,⁶ and his father was, in contrast with the age in which he lived, receptive to new ideas of any kind.⁷ Thomas Bailey continued to support his son's efforts at writing poetry, as is evident in the letters that they exchanged for many years. The British government also supported Bailey's work, for beginning in 1856 until the time of his death, Philip Bailey received a Civil List Pension of 100 pounds. Despite this support from the British government, however, he never received honors.⁸

In addition to Bailey's informal education under his father's guidance, he studied at Glasgow for a number of years. Little is known about this formal phase of Bailey's education except that he

⁴"Philip James Bailey," The Athaenaeum (September 13, 1902), p. 350.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Black, p. 168.

⁷Gosse, p. 763.

⁸"Philip James Bailey," The Athaenaeum (September 13, 1902), p. 350.

matriculated at Glasgow in 1831 and was called to the bar at Lincoln's Inn in 1840. He never attempted a legal practice, however, and devoted the remainder of his eighty-six years to study and writing. In 1901, Glasgow "rather tardily conferred on him the degree of LL. D."⁹ Throughout his life, Bailey "had an attitude of arrested inspiration, as if waiting for the heavenly spark to fall again, as it had descended from 1836-1839, and as it seemed never inclined to descend again."¹⁰ 1839 is the publication date of Festus, Bailey's major work, of which more will be said later in this chapter, and it seems that the "spark" never did descend again, despite the volumes that Bailey continually wrote after Festus was published.

In 1850, when Festus was already in its second edition, The Angel World was published. Although the public was anxious to see more of Bailey's work, The Angel World was poorly received because it lacked fervor.¹¹ Bailey continued writing and publishing, however, and produced a fairly large number of poetic works which have virtually eluded literary criticism. The Mystic appeared and disappeared in 1855. "Of the later publications of Mr. Bailey," comments Edmund Gosse, "it is kinder not to speak in detail."¹² He mentions most of them:

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Gosse, p. 760.

¹¹Ibid., p. 771.

¹²Ibid., p. 773.

The Age, of 1858, was a satire on the manners and morals of the day, in heroic couplets; Universal Hymn, in Thomsonian blank verse, of 1867, was cut up, in the usual way, to feed that poetical Oliver Twist, the insatiable Festus; Nottingham Castle, of 1878, was an attempt at an historical ode in the grand style.¹³

In addition to these books, Bailey published in 1883 Causa Britannica, A Poem in Latin Hexameters with English Paraphrases. None of these poems were accepted by the public, but as Gosse has mentioned in connection with Universal Hymn, "if a poem was received by the critics and the public with marked disfavour, [Bailey] would be even with them by putting it bodily in the next edition of Festus."¹⁴ This is no more than slight exaggeration, for while Festus appeared anonymously in 1839 as an 8000-line poem, it was composed of 40,000 lines in 1889 in its eleventh and final edition in England.¹⁵

In essence, then, Philip Bailey devoted his life to the writing of Festus. He lovingly spoke of its publication history to William Winter in an informal conversation with him in 1897:

"In America," said the poet, "my Festus has passed through thirty editions, while in England it has slowly and painfully toiled through eleven; and from America I have never received a sixpence for it. But I am glad to think that I have many readers and friends in that great country."¹⁶

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 772.

¹⁵Birley, p. 173. For the purposes of this discussion, the fifth edition of Festus will be used.

¹⁶William Winter, Old Friends: Being Literary Recollections of Other Days (New York, 1909), p. 337.

At that time, Festus continued to comprise a large part of Bailey's thoughts. Winter describes "a singular and precious manuscript that [Bailey] had made."¹⁷ It was a schematic illustration of the design of Festus:

. . . in shape a semicircle, the lines radiating from centre to circumference, the celestial, intermediary, astral, and terrestrial scenes being distinguished by red, blue, and black ink; the whole showing the unity and harmony of his design.¹⁸

And Bailey felt that his poem was unified, considering the vastness of its scope. In a letter to Robertson Nicoll and Thomas Wise, he wrote that it was obvious of Festus,

. . . that no more orderly and methodical poem is to be found in the whole range of English literature; no vaster nor more comprehensive theme; no poetical scheme embracing spiritual, ethical, physical and metaphysical bearings more consistently wrought together in relation to inter-dependent parts.¹⁹

The unifying theme in Festus is "the doctrine of Universalism, the belief that all men would be saved," a belief in which "the Redemption . . . comes to be God redeeming Himself and putting right what He Himself has done";²⁰ but the loosely tied narrative form of

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 339.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Bailey, Literary Anecdotes, p. 414.

²⁰ Birley, p. 179.

Festus does little to provide a unifying framework for this theme.

Bailey described both the theme and the form of Festus in a letter to his father on April 26, 1836, when he first started writing the poem:

It is a poem; a dramatic poem (if that may be termed dramatic which boasts no plot, no action; and only a few characters) The plan is this. A young man delivered over to Lucifer, who devotes himself entirely to the mortal's gratifications. The body of the poem is occupied with meditations, arguments, and reflections upon all sorts of subjects and sentiments, principally on hereafter, a future state, rewards and punishments for sin, and happiness to come. Ends with his gradual repentance and Death--and salvation.²¹

Bailey wanted "to illustrate an alternative theory, not only of Divinity, but Humanity."²² He believed that "the doctrine of Universalism had never been introduced into poetry, and in that respect Festus was different than anything that had previously appeared."²³ Festus was to be Bailey's answer to mankind's dilemmas.

From the first page of Festus, the reader is aware that judgment day is upon him. In God's own words, as attributed to him by Bailey:

. . . the white winter of their age is come,
The world and all its world; and all shall end.²⁴

²¹ Philip J. Bailey, quoted in Alan D. McKillop, "A Victorian Faust," Publications of the Modern Language Association, XL (1925), 744.

²² Bailey, Literary Anecdotes, p. 417.

²³ Black, p. 168.

²⁴ Bailey, Festus, p. 1.

The world is doomed, but the saintly shall never sway from faith.

Bailey portrays the faith of the Seraphim in appropriately trite verse:

God! God! God!
 Years on years!
 And what appears
 Save God to love?
 God! God! God!
 All Thou dost make
 Lies like a lake
 Below Thine infinite eye:
 Years on years!
 And all appears
 Save God to die.²⁵

Bailey uses Festus, God, and Lucifer as his main characters in Festus. The Holy Ghost, Son of God, and various saints and mortals play minor roles. The poet knows that he is young and talented, and rationalizes the lack of restraint in his work:

Life is at blood-heat every page doth prove.
 Bear with it. Nature means Necessity.²⁶

The reader must, therefore, suspend reality to follow Festus, a chosen mortal, in his flight with Lucifer throughout the earth, the moon, the stars, heaven, and hell.

At the beginning of the poem, Lucifer is up in heaven for the first time since his fall and asks God if he can have the soul of a mortal named Festus. God grants this request, so Lucifer goes back to earth

²⁵ibid., pp. 1-2.

²⁶ibid., "Dedication."

to tempt Festus. Festus, who is a proud and idealistic young poet, does not surrender to Lucifer and proclaims that he is not ready to die. Lucifer offers Festus the opportunity to gain experience without actually surrendering his soul, and thus, the two set off together for the spiritual world. Festus is kept alive throughout this experience, so he is continually allowed to go back to earth, where he has time for reflection and reconsideration of his experiences, and opportunity to sin further. Bailey handles the technical difficulties of such rapid transformations by giving Lucifer the power to protect Festus. The following is one instance of this technique:

Recline thou calmly on yon marble slab,
As though asleep. The world will miss Thee not,
Its complement is perfect. I will mind
That no impertinent meddler troubles there
Thy trancèd frame.²⁷

Festus contains a series of intellectual and emotional explorations of main Spasmodic themes: love, evil, and the after-life. Through questioning, probing, and experience, Festus gradually gains knowledge and wisdom and grows closer to God. With appropriate settings for each discussion, Bailey gradually brings the world to an end. Despite Festus' gain in wisdom, the world continues to wallow in ignorance. Bailey vividly describes judgment day and the earth after destruction, being explicit in his description, and ends the work with Festus saved and one

²⁷Ibid., p. 150.

with God. He declares the all-importance of God through God's mouth:

World without end, and I am God alone.
The Aye, the Infinite, the Whole, the One.

I only shall be--when the worlds have done
My boundless Being will be but begun.²⁸

According to Bailey, God is Love, and Love is all-important.

Love pervades much of Spasmodic writing and is a main theme of Festus.

Knowledge of evil as a way to godliness and the doctrine of universal salvation in an after-life are the other major themes.

Festus is a Spasmodic Don Juan. Apparently an attractive young male, he is hopelessly romantic when first presented and follows a pattern of capturing and breaking the female hearts that he encounters. As Lucifer tries to convince him of the benefits of joining his evil ranks, Festus asks Lucifer what he can offer that is greater than love. Lucifer replies that he can give him many loves. Festus temporarily accepts this promise. He deviates from the Don Juan pattern, however, when he gives Clara final and lasting happiness, repairing her shattered heart after once breaking it.

Physical and spiritual love combine in Festus' relationships, and he sincerely feels and pledges total devotion to each of his beautiful mortal goddesses in turn. At the beginning of the poem, he is totally crushed by the loss of Angela through death. When Lucifer takes Festus

²⁸Ibid., p. 562.

to Angela's spirit, Festus says:

Dear art thou to me now, as in that hour
When first Love's wave of feeling, spray-like broke
Into bright utterance, and we said we loved.²⁹

To Lucifer he says, "I will not, cannot be without her."³⁰ But in a scene with Clara that shortly follows, he says:

I know that thou dost love me. I in vain
Strive to love aught of earth or Heaven but thee.
Thou art my first, last, only love; nor shall
Another even attempt my heart.³¹

But when Festus chances upon Angela again, in "another and a better world,"³² he says:

When I forget that the stars shine in air--
When I forget that beauty is in stars--
When I forget that love with beauty is--
Will I forget thee: till then, all things else.³³

Before the reader has time to think about Angela, he finds Festus engaged in a lengthy, flattering discourse with Helen, another beautiful woman. When Helen senses that perhaps Festus is not faithful, and that his love will not last, Festus says:

I love thee, and will leave thee never,
Until my soul leaves life for ever.³⁴

²⁹Ibid., p. 32.

³⁰Ibid., p. 33.

³¹Ibid., p. 72.

³³Ibid., p. 167.

³²Ibid., p. 152.

³⁴Ibid., p. 180.

Festus knows that it is his Fate to break all women's hearts, and he therefore feels that it is right. When Marian reproaches him as a false flatterer, he replies:

It is my fate
To love, and make who love me hate. ³⁵

By the time Festus reaches its final version, "Helen and Marian have to listen to a speech by Festus of 1994 lines. "³⁶

Festus has more association with Helen in the poem than he does with any other woman. Mention of Angela in a conversation with Helen is the only point at which Festus remembers one woman in the presence of another; thus, it is "the only time that Bailey attempts to place Festus' relationships with women in the framework of his sins and eventual forgiveness. "³⁷

Despite his enormous love for Helen, Festus soon meets Lucifer's mortal love, Elissa, and falls in love with her:

I have loved thee till I can love nought beside.
My heart is drenched with love as with a cloud . . .
I have all things but thee--shun men like snakes--
Women, like pits. ³⁸

Never did angel love its Heaven--nor King
Crown, as I thee. ³⁹

³⁵Ibid., p. 195.

³⁶Birley, p. 193.

³⁸Bailey, Festus, p. 426.

³⁷Ibid., p. 192.

³⁹Ibid., p. 427.

After leaving Elissa, Festus summons Clara. Although Clara feels that she has been wronged, she still loves him. Festus declares that he can feel no passion for her, that he simply must move forward alone. Clara sincerely needs Festus, however, and he feels complete when he can again accept and return her love. "In later versions Bailey was to extend greatly the part of Clara, who eventually marries Festus. Their brief honeymoon of 2241 lines of discussion is interrupted by the end of the world."⁴⁰

Thus, Philip Bailey shows his conception of the all-importance of Love. He shows that because humans have flaws, love between mortals does not always possess the perfect honesty that is necessary for happiness. But he believes that mortals do have the ability to love and can be one with God only after they develop this ability. In depicting Festus' mortal relationships with women, he gives equal weight to the sensual and the spiritual. He believes that the spiritual aspect of love is all-important, however, to the soul.

Evil is the element mourned with vocal force comparable to the moanings over lost love or the inability to love. Pet words such as "woe," "alas," "grieve," and "mourn" appear on almost every page of Spasmodic poetry and are generally connected in some way with evil. Once captured in a cage of woe, Bailey, too, finds much difficulty in

⁴⁰Birley, p. 201.

changing the atmosphere in any manner other than increasing the volume of his wails.

Festus bears the burden of man's evil in his soul. "The worm of the world hath eaten out [his] heart."⁴¹ Bailey employs the conventional symbols of the worm, serpent, and devil to represent the forces of evil on and in man. And at the same time that Bailey bemoans these evil forces, he sees knowledge of them as a necessary path to salvation. He "does not intend his work to be a mere glorification of lawless impulse. He represents unbridled youthful passion as a splendid and inevitable, but at the same time disastrous thing."⁴²

Interestingly, Lucifer, in Festus, is the most clearly defined, witty character in the poem. Bailey repeatedly gives Lucifer strong, coherent lines that Festus frequently cannot comprehend. He shows through the contrast between Festus' relative lack of knowledge and Lucifer's wisdom that man must have tremendous knowledge to overcome evil and understanding of it to reach God. Lucifer's evil proddings generally cause Festus to look more firmly toward God. Lucifer is an embodiment of grief, completely lacking self-respect, even though he frequently brags about his merits. He does all of his ill deeds under an outward cloak of sincerity and frequently appears as though he will

⁴¹ Bailey, Festus, p. 20.

⁴² McKillop, p. 758.

achieve his goals. As Festus says of Lucifer, he is "a fit monitor . . . of pleasure."⁴³ Festus, on the other hand, knows, but does not embody evil. Because of Lucifer's powerful personality, his almost total destruction at the end of the poem has strong emotional impact. Lucifer is uniformly evil throughout the poem, however, while Festus moves from the evils of pride and lust to virtue and purity. "Festus is saved," according to Greta Black, "because with all his doubts he never doubted." With increased knowledge, he is ready to "pass on to very union with God himself."⁴⁴

Bailey presents what seems to be a rather over-simplification of evil for a man who is so woeful about the situation, presenting only the two extremes--evil and godliness. Luniel discusses at length the cycle of the beautiful creation, corruption through evil, and the inevitable destruction, always to be followed by creation once again.⁴⁵ Since nothing but God is perfect, says Bailey, evil is a necessary consequence. But since God created the conditions for evil as well as good, He will provide universal salvation.

It can be seen, then, that Bailey presented views in Festus that are considerably different from those in Goethe's Faust or Marlowe's

⁴³ Bailey, Festus, p. 30.

⁴⁴ Black, p. 170.

⁴⁵ Bailey, Festus, pp. 489-533.

Tragical History of Dr. Faustus. Although the limitations of this thesis do not permit full discussion of the sources of Festus, mention of them will add some insight towards an understanding of Bailey's work. Since Philip Bailey was a man of letters, and since he was exposed to literary works from an early age, there is little question that his writings were influenced by his literary predecessors, but there is little critical agreement on what the major sources were. The main controversy lies in whether Bailey was more influenced by Goethe or by Byron. External and internal evidence seems to indicate that both writers exerted tremendous influence in both specific and general ways.

Bailey's words to Nicoll and Wise indicate that he had, at the least, reacted to the works of Goethe and of the British Romantic poets. He comments that he feels he has handled man's theological problems more effectively, that is, with less confusion in Festus than had previous philosophical writers. He criticizes Goethe's Faust, calling it,

. . . that vast jumble of Greek and Gothic fable laid before the world by Goethe in his divisional and therefore aesthetically unsatisfactory production, Faust; the author of which, abandoning altogether the motive and purport of the original national legend he had set himself to handle.⁴⁶

He feels superior to Byron ". . . in his intermittent scepticism and reiterated Manicheism, " and to Shelley ". . . in his rapid and irrational atheism."⁴⁷

⁴⁶Bailey, Literary Anecdotes, p. 416.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 415.

Despite Bailey's negative comments about these men, however, their influence on him is not disguised. Contemporary reviewers almost unanimously commented at the time Festus was first published in 1839 that Bailey had put Goethe's Faust in a palatable form. It is in this first edition particularly that Goethe's influence can be seen.⁴⁸ Goethe had been in vogue since the beginning of the nineteenth century, "although Faust did not begin to come into its own in England until the appearance of Lord F. Leveson Gower's translation in 1823."⁴⁹ Goethe's death in 1832 aroused even more interest in him than had been present before.

Several later critics note marked differences between Goethe and Bailey. McKillop notes that "Goethe is secular and realistic, whereas Bailey is concerned with abstract theological salvation."⁵⁰ Black comments that "the mention of the word love brings us to an even greater divergence between Bailey's work and Goethe's. What have all Bailey's shadows, women in name only, in common with Gretchen?"⁵¹ It is in the characterization of Lucifer that critics generally see the greatest influence of Goethe. McKillop observes that "the figure of Lucifer is a combination of elements from Milton, Byron, and Goethe, but in his

⁴⁸Black, p. 171.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 167.

⁵⁰McKillop, pp. 750-751.

⁵¹Black, p. 170.

relation to God and man he is closer to Mephistopheles than to Milton's Satan or to Byron's Lucifer."⁵²

In addition to Goethe's influence, McKillop says that "no youth writing verses in England in the twenties and thirties could escape Byron's influence."⁵³ The Don Juan characteristics of Festus have been shown, as well as "the characteristic Byronic theme of remorse for a lost love . . . , [for] passionate, disillusioned youth is the very core of Byronism and of Festus."⁵⁴

Robert Birley also notes Byron's influence on Bailey, saying that "Bailey, in fact, was more influenced by Byron than by Goethe, and Festus is frequently a very Byronic young man."⁵⁵ Birley suspects that although "Universalism was no new belief, . . . Bailey found the idea that evil was something for which God must accept responsibility in a dialogue in Cain." It is in "the style and poetic diction of Festus," however, that Bailey most shows the influence of Byron's dramatic poems.⁵⁶

⁵²McKillop, p. 749.

⁵³Ibid., p. 753.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 754.

⁵⁵Birley, p. 181.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 180.

Alan McKillop crystallizes the relative influence of Goethe and Byron on Bailey. He says,

It will appear that into the loose outline of Faust Bailey put much from the English romantic poets, particularly Byron, and added much of his own. This granted, it is certain that Faust gave Bailey his general scheme of presentation.⁵⁷

.....
Bailey's indebtedness to Faust is general rather than particular. Setting aside the relation to Goethe, and considering the poetry rather than the theology, we may say that Festus derives from the English romantic group.⁵⁸

With the strength of youth, good health, an education, and financial security, Philip Bailey raised the emotional pitch of his Romantic predecessors. He had the assurance of youth, the impaired sensitivity of one who doubts but never doubts, and the lack of restraint of a rebel. Combined in one individual, these elements created the father of the Spasmodic school of poets, Philip James Bailey. The envoi to Festus shows the intensity of Bailey's passion and his reason for writing:

Read this, world! He who writes is dead to thee,
But still lives in these leaves. He spake inspired:
Night and day, thought came unhelped, undesired,
Like blood to his heart. The course of study he
Went through was of the soul-rack. The degree
He took was high: it was wise wretchedness.
He suffered perfectly, and gained no less
A prize than, in his own torn heart, to see
A few bright seeds: he sowed them--hoped them truth.
The autumn of that seed is in these pages.
God was with him; and bade old Time, to the youth,

⁵⁷McKillop, p. 749.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 752.

Unclench his heart, and teach the book of ages.
Peace to thee, world!--farewell! May God the Power,
And God the Love--and God the Grace, be ours!⁵⁹

⁵⁹Bailey, "L'Envoi," Festus.

CHAPTER III

"OFT AN UNHAPPY THOUGHT":

ALEXANDER SMITH

In 1854, fifteen years after Festus was first published, Alexander Smith showed that he shared the intensity of Philip Bailey's passion by publishing "A Life Drama," a dramatic poem of smaller scope, but equal in exuberance to Festus. Smith was only nine years old when Festus was published, but he went through adolescence in the height of Bailey's popularity. Alexander Smith had been born in Kilmarnock on December 31, 1830. In contrast with Bailey's secure childhood, Smith often knew poverty. He was a voracious reader starting at an early age, and because of his family's poor financial condition, the major part of his education was obtained through individual, unguided reading. After finishing grade school, he was forced to serve as apprentice to his father, a pattern designer.¹ Smith grew up in Glasgow, but was in the "habit of spending his summer holiday in the Highlands of the Western Isles, where he composed a great deal of verse and recited it to his

¹Herbert B. Grimsditch, "Alexander Smith: Poet and Essayist," London Mercury, XII (July, 1925), 284.

companion while tramping among the glens and mountains."² It was during these summer vacations that he wrote the fragments of verse that later became "A Life Drama."

"A Life Drama" was the first of Alexander Smith's major poetic works and is representative of both his style and his themes. It is a description of a young poet's search for identity, for satisfaction of an undefined need. He searches for fulfillment through mortal love, by achieving fame through his poetry, and through the worship of nature. He achieves happiness, however, only when he finds both God and love.

"A Life Drama" is a loosely connected series of scenes depicting various episodes in the young poet Walter's life during a three year period. Most of the lines are spoken by Walter, although other characters are introduced in a number of scenes. Walter has two loves during the course of the drama, an unnamed Lady and Violet; as well as several acquaintances, Mr. Wilmott, a peasant, and Arthur; and two friends, Edward and Charles. The verse-drama begins with a lengthy monologue by Walter in which he mourns the burden on the shoulders of man and his hopeless and insignificant position in the face of a magnificent, but melancholy universe. He lusts for fame; he is despondent. But not for long, for in the second scene the beautiful Lady comes upon Walter asleep in the woods and they fall in love. All is happy until the Lady discloses

²Ibid., p. 285.

that she is betrothed to an old man and that she is obliged to marry him.

Walter is once again plunged into despair. He has conceived of a mighty poem, a description of the creation, development, and destruction of the world, as his life's work, the work that will bring him fame; but he cannot find the strength to write it. He has been left an empty shell by the loss of his love. Walter finds some relief in a conversation with Edward, and the two decide to go to Bedfordshire, where they will see ". . . various specimens of that biped, Man."³ The trip turns out to be a pleasant one, for it is there that Walter meets the beautiful Violet. They fall in love, and Walter is filled with ecstasy in the warmth of Violet's love, that is, on page 132 of "A Life Drama." On page 133, the reader finds Walter at midnight on a deserted bridge preparing to jump to his death.

Walter has once again plunged into despair, prompted by a vaguely defined guilt that he suddenly feels in his love for Violet. An outcast girl happens upon the bridge as Walter is about to jump, and he tells her that he is not fit to live. After speaking with her for a while, however, he decides to live and is once more consumed by his lust for fame. He succeeds in writing a poem that is immediately accepted by the public, but he finds that even this popularity is not fulfilling. In a conversation

³Alexander Smith, "A Life Drama," Poems (Boston, 1854), p. 93.

with Edward, Charles says of Walter:

. . . Oft an unhappy thought,
 Telling all is not well, falls from his soul
 Like a diseased feather from the wing
 Of a sick eagle; a scorched meteor-stone
 Dropped from the ruined moon.⁴

Walter's friends have faith, however, that he will find happiness in renewed faith in God, and he does. Walter goes back to Violet, and through love, they renew their faith together.

It can be seen that Walter's changes in attitude towards life are rather abrupt. Smith uses these changing attitudes to express various aspects of his ideas. He presents many points of view throughout "A Life Drama" about each of the themes common to the Spasmodics, giving almost equal weight to each point of view, rather than approaching the themes from a single point of view. Thus, although he briefly resolves Walter's problems at the end of the drama, and states, in that way, what the reader would assume to be his point of view, the reader has difficulty in seeing the reason for Smith's solutions; they seem to be arbitrarily chosen solutions rather than the inevitable result of a series of events. This is seen in Smith's treatment of love, which is, as with other Spasmodic works, a central theme of "A Life Drama."

Considering Walter's happiness through love at the end of the drama and his exhilaration through love at various other points during the drama,

⁴Ibid., p. 145.

it is fairly clear that Alexander Smith believes that love is all-important.

Probably the clearest expression of this belief is in a song sung by Violet:

Nothing remains but Love: the world's round mass
 It doth pervade, all forms of life it shares,
 The institutions that like moments pass
 Are but the shapes the masking spirit wears.
 Love is a sanctifier; 't is a moon
 Turning each dusk to silver. A pure light,
 Redeemer of all errors--⁵

But despite this expression of the all-importance of love, it is intensely decried at other times during the drama. After seeing a beautiful child,

Walter exclaims:

. . . . O bright and singing babe!
 What wilt thou be hereafter?--Why should man
 Perpetuate this round of misery
 When he has in his hand the power to close it?
 Let there be no warm hearts, no love on earth.
 No Love! No Love! Love bringeth wretchedness.⁶

Soon after decrying love, however, Walter is disturbed by Edward's callousness towards his ambitious feelings. He chides Edward for having the very attitude that he has just expressed:

. . . he who sneers at any living hope
 Or aspiration of a human heart
 Is just so many stages less than God,
 That universal and all-sided Love.⁷

The all-important Love at this point in the drama is God, and only God,

⁵Ibid., p. 157.

⁶Ibid., p. 71.

⁷Ibid., pp. 84-85.

but Smith also declares other types of love as the only ones. Love is sometimes nature, sometimes poetry, and sometimes woman--each presented as the ultimate in love.

Countless conceits throughout "A Life Drama" show that Alexander Smith sees love in nature, particularly in the stars and moon. Near the beginning of the drama, Walter declares that he draws his strength from the moon.⁸ A representative conceit in which love and the moon are intertwined is in the Lady's speech when she discovers Walter sleeping in the woods.

Love! Love! Old song that Poet ever chanteth,
Of which the listening world is never weary.
Soul is a moon, Love is its loveliest phase.⁹

The stars, too, are objects of Walter's love throughout the drama; he loves them overmuch.¹⁰ But in the last line of another scene, in a mood of intense disillusionment, Edward cries:

What care the stars for us?¹¹

Walter does not answer Edward's words, and at the end of the drama, he says to Violet:

. . . Let the still night shine!
A star's a cold thing to a human heart,
And love is better than their radiance.¹²

⁸Ibid., p. 8.

⁹Ibid., p. 15.

¹¹Ibid., p. 98.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 123.

¹²Ibid., p. 160.

Walter worships poetry as his love at the beginning of "A Life Drama," and he is consumed by his desire to be a great poet throughout the poem. In one conversation with Violet, Walter says:

So gradual, one passion slowly died,
And from its death the other drew fresh life,
Until 't was seated in his soul alone:
The dead was Love--the living, Poetry. ¹³

Later, however, he says to Violet:

. . . My Beautiful!
I would not give thy cheek for all his songs--
Thy kiss for all his fame ¹⁴

Thus, love of woman has become the all-consuming love; but despite his words, Walter is still consumed by his love of poetry, going on to write his great work.

Certainly, man's ideas fluctuate; this is evident in everyone that an individual knows, including himself. But there are reasons for these fluctuations. Without some consideration of the motivation for changes in an individual's point of view, his thoughts are more puzzling than they are convincing. Thus, when a reader is confronted with a fluctuating main character, without sufficient knowledge of the reasons for his changes of views, the reader's perception of the individual, and thereby, the ideas that he verbalizes, becomes blurred rather than deepened. That is what becomes of Alexander Smith's concept of love

¹³Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 131.

in "A Life Drama." Although Walter finally finds fulfillment in love of God, the reader is not shown why Walter is able to find this fulfillment at the end of the drama when he was not able to find it at the beginning.

Smith's concept of the nature of evil is also rather vaguely defined in "A Life Drama," although there is not as much diversity in the handling of this theme as there is in the discussion of love. Smith sees evil in the masses in the city, evil in the "iron world" that is closing in, and evil in Walter's quest for fame. He sees all of these things as evil mainly because they are apart from God. This would be a powerfully unified concept if it were developed, but as with his concept of love, Smith does not sufficiently develop any one of these aspects of evil for it to be convincing.

Smith sometimes considers the world as an evil influence, declaring that the external forces of the world pollute man on the outside, but leave him pure inside:

. . . Better for man,
 Were he and Nature more familiar friends!
 His part is worst that touches this base world.
 Although the ocean's inmost heart be pure,
 Yet the salt fringe that daily licks the shore
 Is gross with sand.¹⁵

He gives man more responsibility for the evil in the world in a speech by Edward. After Walter expresses his desire to save the world, Edward says:

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 10-11.

So would not I,
 Because the pangs of earth shall ne'er be eased,
 We sleep on velvets now, instead of leaves;
 The land is covered with a net of iron,
 Upon whose spider-like, far-stretching lines,
 The trains are rushing; . . .

.
 Walter! this height of civilization's tide
 Measures our wrong. We've made the immortal Soul
 Slave to the Body. 'T is the Soul has wrought
 And laid the iron roads, --evoked a power
 Next mightiest to God to drive the trains
 That bring the country butter up to town;¹⁶

At a time when the green countryside in England was abruptly turning gray as a result of the rapid growth of industry, railroads, and towns, it was not uncommon for the poet, or any sensitive individual, to decry these aspects of civilization as evil. But to the Spasmodic Smith, these elements caused him to cry:

'The world is old, --O! very old--
 The wild winds weep and rave,
 The world is old, and gray, and cold,
 Let it drop into its grave!¹⁷

Walter bursts into song at the thought of people within the city:

In the street, the tide of being, how it surges, how
 it rolls!
 God! what base ignoble faces! God! what bodies
 wanting souls!
 'Mid this stream of human being, banked by houses
 tall and grim,
 Pale I stand this shining morrow with a pant for
 woodlands dim, . . .¹⁸

¹⁶Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 26.

Frequently, as in this case, Smith holds the poet apart from the evil masses, for he can still look at the stars. Later in the drama, Walter says:

I'd grow an Atheist in these towns of trade,
 Were 't not for stars. The smoke puts heaven out
 I meet sin-bloated faces in the streets,
 And shrink as from a blow

 I see no trace of God, till in the night,
 While the vast city lies in dreams of gain,
 He doth reveal himself to me in heaven.¹⁹

But just as often as Walter is apart from the evil world, he embodies evil. When contemplating suicide, Walter says:

. . . Woe is me!
 My soul breeds sins as a dead body worms!
 They swarm and feed upon me²⁰

Here, the typical symbol of the worm represents evil; Smith particularly follows Philip Bailey's model in this respect. What appears to be Smith's concept of the greatest evil in Walter, however, is his lust for fame, even though this lust is frequently described as Walter's desire to save humanity. At many points in the drama, Walter declares that achieving fame will lead him to God.

Thou shalt not 'scape me, World! I'll make thee weep;
 I'll make my lone thought cross thee like a spirit,

 I'll rest myself, O World! a while on thee,

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 123-124.

²⁰Ibid., p. 134.

And half in earnest, half in jest, I'll cut
 My name upon thee, pass the arch of Death,
 Then on a stair of stars go up to God.²¹

But at other times, Walter sees that fame would not lead him to God.

He feels that this is because of his own insignificance, not because lust for fame is evil in itself. He says of achieving godliness through fame:

This--this were easy to believe, were I
 The planet that doth nightly wash the earth's
 Fair sides with moonlight; not the shining worm,
 But as I am--beaten, and foiled, and shamed,
 The arrow of my soul which I had shot
 To bring down Fame, dissolved like shaft of mist,
 This painted falsehood, this most damnéd lie,
 Freezes me like a fiendish human face,
 Its hateful features gathered in a sneer.²²

But although Alexander Smith depicts lust for fame as evil, it is probable that Walter's faith in God would never have been renewed if he had not seen for himself the small satisfaction that is found in fame alone. In this respect, Alexander Smith expresses a major theme of Festus, that of knowledge of evil as a way to God. Again, however, Smith does not fully describe Walter's attainment of this knowledge, and thus, the reader remains puzzled about exactly what Smith's view of evil is.

It has been evident throughout this discussion of Smith's ideas on love and evil that he believed in an after-life, a heaven of some kind that man strives for. But in contrast with Bailey's guided tour of heaven in

²¹Ibid., p. 142.

²²Ibid., p. 8.

Festus, Smith says little about his concept of the nature of the after-life or the qualifications for admission to heaven. It can be assumed that he considered such admission desirable, but he devotes some of the most highly emotional lines of "A Life Drama" to a deprecation of the after-life. When speaking to a peasant, Walter says:

Black is this world, but blacker is the next;
 There is no rest for any living soul:
 We are immortals--and must bear with us
 Through all eternity this hateful being;
 Restlessly flitting from pure star to star,
 The memory of our sins, deceits, and crimes,
 Will eat into us like a poisoned robe.²³

These lines describing an after-life, juxtaposed with Walter's desire to reach heaven, create a blurred impression of Alexander Smith's heaven. Charles Kingsley makes a biting, but seemingly valid comment about this aspect of "A Life Drama." He says that "true, [Smith] has written a great deal of nonsense; nonsense in matter as well as in manner. But therein, too, he only followed the reigning school."²⁴ "A Life Drama" was generally accepted enthusiastically by the public, giving Smith sudden, but short-lived fame. And indeed, "A Life Drama" has some virtues. As Kingsley says in the same essay in which he calls Smith's work nonsense,

²³ Ibid., pp. 73-74.

²⁴ Charles Kingsley, "Alexander Smith and Alexander Pope," Literary and General Lectures and Essays (London, 1898), p. 69.

Though the "Life Drama" itself is the merest cento of reflections and images, without coherence or organization, dramatic or logical, yet single scenes, like that with the peasant and that with the fallen outcast, have firm self-consistency and clearness of conception²⁵

It can also be noted that Alexander Smith obviously loved language and frequently created lyrics that are pleasing to the ear. This is particularly notable in his conceits involving the moon and the stars. Although they frequently seem irrelevant, they are pleasant to hear. It is this quality of Smith's writing that George Gilfillan most lauded. He says that "Smith is naturally a master of music, and needs only a careful culture to complete the mastery."²⁶ Whether Smith ever "completed the mastery" is doubtful, but the musical quality is present in his writing.

During the same year that "A Life Drama" was published, 1854, Alexander Smith was employed as Secretary to the University of Edinburgh. It was here that he collaborated with Sydney Dobell on a volume of poems called Sonnets on the War, which was published in 1855. This volume was received rather coldly because of Aytoun's critical attack in his satire Firmilian.²⁷ Dobell and Smith's ease in collaborating, however, shows the similarity of their views.

²⁵Ibid., p. 68.

²⁶George Gilfillan, Gilfillan's Literary Portraits, edited by W. Robertson Nicoll (London, n. d.), p. 70.

²⁷Grimsditch, p. 285.

Smith wrote two other volumes of poems, City Poems, published in 1857, and Edwin of Deira, published in 1861. Both of these volumes are somewhat refined in diction compared to "A Life Drama," but they are extensions rather than developments of Smith's themes and thus do not bear detailed discussion here. There was tremendous critical controversy over plagiarism in each of these volumes, controversy that had already begun with the publication of "A Life Drama." Although it is clear that Smith took ". . ." as his models Shelley, Keats, and their followers,²⁸ the charge of plagiarism was never proved or disproved. W. Robertson Nicoll observes that Bailey ". . ." believed that Smith had plagiarized from him, and late in life stated this very strongly . . . both in speech and in print. But certainly, Smith was unconscious of plagiarism.²⁹ In the process, however, the controversy led Alexander Smith away from the writing of poetry and into the prose medium. He published several volumes of essays which met with critical approval, Dreamthorpe, published in 1863, being the most popular of these.³⁰

Alexander Smith died of typhoid fever in 1867 when he was thirty-seven years old.³¹ Respected by many, belittled by others, his poetic works remain representative of the Spasmodic school.

²⁸Kingsley, p. 65.

²⁹W. Robertson Nicoll, "Introduction," Gilfillan's Literary Portraits (London, n. d.), p. xvi.

³⁰Grimsditch, p. 286.

³¹Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

"THROUGH ALL THE CIRCLING CYCLES, LOVE IS LOVE":

SYDNEY DOBELL

Strike off the clay mold from the bronze Apollo, throw your critics to one wind and their sermons to the other, let Self be made absolute as you take up your pen and write, like a god, in a sublime egotism, to which your own likes and dislikes are unquestioned law.¹

The source of Sydney Dobell's Spasmodism, more extreme than that of Smith or Bailey, can be readily understood when one considers his childhood. First-born son of a family of Primitive Christians who held the belief that there was to be a ". . . return to the apostolic practice," Dobell was told by his parents as soon as he was capable of any understanding that he ". . . was the chosen instrument of God for this work."² Since his parents also believed that children should be sheltered from individuals with opposing religious beliefs, Dobell was intensely and austere educated at home.³ Thus, "at the age of three,

¹Sydney Dobell, "Clay and Bronze," Foundations of English Style, edited by Paul M. Fulcher (New York, 1928), p. 183.

²George Woodberry, Literary Memoirs of the Nineteenth Century (New York, 1921), p. 121.

³Mrs. Sydney Dobell, "Introductory Memoir," The Poems of Sydney Dobell (London, n. d.), p. viii.

Sydney Dobell announced that he preferred mental diversion to eating and drinking . . . ,"⁴ and at the age of eight, " . . . his diary [was] filled with theology and his waste-paper with verses."⁵ In addition to the resulting, deep-rooted moral sternness, Dobell constantly struggled against his failing health, and later in life, against the failing health of his wife. He spent long hours during adolescence working in his father's shop because of the poor financial condition of his family, by that time composed of ten children.⁶ For Dobell, a sensitive individual, these influences created a " . . . feeling of isolation and superiority,"⁷ which when combined with his strong sense of Christian duty would naturally cause him to feel that he was divinely inspired. Dobell's aims were lofty, though vaguely defined, throughout his life, and his poor health caused him to fight harder than most individuals would need to in an attempt to accomplish his aims. Since he had little money and his religious views were opposed to those generally held by the then dominant Church of England, he did not seek expression for "God's words" through the ministry; rather he adopted the Spasmodic style of writing and pursued a literary career.

⁴Sir Edmund Gosse, "The Centenary of a Spasmodist," Silhouettes (London, 1925), p. 329.

⁵Woodberry, p. 121.

⁶Ibid., p. 122.

⁷Alfred H. Miles, editor, The Poets and the Poetry of the Nineteenth Century (London, 1905), V, 211.

The Roman, Dobell's first major work, a frantically patriotic dramatic poem, was published in 1850, a time when patriotic sentiments were high. Thus, it was warmly received, giving Dobell sudden, much desired fame. Both public and critics were optimistically attentive when his Balder, Part I was published in 1854.

George Gilfillan hailed Balder as ". . . the richest volume of recent poetry next to Festus"⁸ and was convinced along with other Spasmodic sympathizers that Dobell was a "genius." But upon more critical analysis of Balder, even Dobell's most firm supporters, including George Gilfillan, were somewhat disappointed. Gilfillan represents Dobell's admirers when he says:

Balder, with all its power and brilliance, has certainly a degree of disease in it. It is a great organ cracked. Its selection of a subject was an error, and its treatment of it is disfigured with obscurities and affectations, which, but for its vast counterbalancing power, would have entirely sunk it. . . . Its very finest passages are marred by diffusion and diabetes verborum. In this we speak the sentiments of the wisest and the ablest of Mr. Dobell's friends, who all look upon Balder as on the whole a magnificent mistake, and some of whom entertain the hope that Part First will be Part Last.⁹

Despite the remaining fragments of faith of some critics, however, Balder was generally received with unqualified ridicule; Dobell's fame quickly faded. It is this Spasmodic work in particular that William

⁸George Gilfillan, Gilfillan's Literary Portraits, edited by W. Robertson Nicoll (London, n. d.), p. 46.

⁹Ibid., p. 61.

Edmondstoune Aytoun burlesques in Firmilian, for it is even more extreme in its Spasmodism, according to the definition stated in this thesis, than is either "A Life Drama" or Festus. It is pertinent, then, to consider Balder in some detail.

The plot of Balder is such that it is difficult to tell what is happening, or if anything is happening, throughout the drama. All that can be gathered, essentially, is that there are two main characters, Balder, a young poet, and his wife Amy. Balder speaks while sitting at his writing desk or while pacing the floor of his study; Amy speaks while sitting in a rocking chair or while lying in bed in an adjoining room. As the poem progresses, the reader is exposed to a series of outcries, alternately from Balder and from Amy. The only other characters in the drama are the couple's infant child; Dr. Paul, a physician; and an artist. The child is used for little more than subject matter for Amy's self-pity; the doctor stands next to, but does not interact with either Amy or Balder; and the artist serves as a sounding-board for some of Balder's discourses.

Balder is consumed with the ambition to write a great epic poem, the ever-present desire of the Spasmodic poet-hero, and seeks the knowledge that will enable him to write this epic. It is to be an allegory on the nature of the universe, containing such abstractions as Patience, Genius, War, Justice, and Death. Balder has knowledge of each of these

ideas, with the exception of Death. He is thus haunted with the desire to learn of it:

Death, Death, Death!
I have seen every face but thine to-day!
And to behold thee, from sunrise till now,
How have I strained these eyeballs!¹⁰

Since Balder believes that he is destined to write this great epic, he wonders how fate will lead him to learn of Death. While still wondering, he hears Amy's ever-present wails and realizes that she is wailing about the weakening strength of their infant child. Balder is thus relieved, feeling that the death of their child would be a relatively easy way to learn the nature of Death. He reveals the egotistical nature of his feelings when he says,

Yes, I redeem the mother with the child!
Fate, take thy price! If this hand shakes to pay it,
'Tis with the trembling eagerness of him
Who buys an Indian kingdom with a bead.
'Tis past. I rise up childless, but no less
Than I¹¹

But fate interferes with this smooth plan, as it so often does for the Spasmodic, and Balder not only loses his child, but is consequently plagued by ever-increasing, depressed wails from Amy. He feels that he has gained no greater understanding of Death and thus becomes increasingly ambitious at the same time as he becomes less productive.

¹⁰John Nichol, The Poetical Works of Sydney Dobell (London, 1875), II, 63.

¹¹Ibid., p. 76.

He can no longer completely ignore Amy although his main concern with her is still primarily that she is interfering with the divinely inspired course of his work. Balder hears Amy say that she wants to die, so he decides that he must kill her, and he does so by stabbing her while she is asleep. Balder is thus left alone to continue his wails in a state of utter despair.

Dobell has created in Balder a situation in which there is little interaction and certainly no communication between characters, a situation that is evident, although not to such a great degree, in "A Life Drama" and Festus. If the impossibility of real communication between human beings were the theme of Dobell's dramatic poem, he might have successfully presented this idea; but this is not the case. Dobell's concern in Balder seems to be with the conventional Spasmodic themes: love, evil, and immortality, for it is of these ideas that both Amy and Balder most often speak. Thus, Dobell has created a poem which illustrates lack of communication between individuals at the same time as he has attempted to comment on ideas which treat man as a part of a whole system, not as an inescapably alone, non-communicative being. The resulting drama is as inherently contradictory as Edward Albee's American Dream would have been had he attempted to present the Platonic concept of love through Mommy and Daddy. Albee's result would be a combination of ridiculousness and incoherence, exactly the effect that Dobell has created in Balder.

But even if the form of Balder were appropriate for Dobell's ideas, it is doubtful that the ideas would be more coherent, for as is true of the other members of his school, Dobell presents so many ideas, without restraint, that no single idea is developed. Further difficulty is encountered because Dobell never completed Balder, and whereas he leaves Balder in complete despair at the end of Part I and thus gives no indication of a solution for his dilemma, he might have made a clearer statement of his views had he completed the work. Because Dobell deals with the same general subjects as the other Spasmodic poets do, it is important at least to discuss what he says, even though the vague nature of his ideas makes specific analysis impossible.

For Dobell, as for Smith and Bailey, love is sometimes nature, sometimes poetry, and sometimes woman. He considers spiritual love as supreme, but he differs from his fellow Spasmodics in that rather than subordinating the physical aspects of love to the spiritual aspects, he virtually ignores the physical. Balder has only one love, Amy, as compared with Festus' harem and Walter's two loves; although Balder hails Amy's beauty, he desires purely spiritual union with her, and that only rarely. As Gilfillan notes, while "Smith's idea of love, though not impure, is passionate; that of [Dobell] is more Platonic than Plato's own."¹²

¹²Gilfillan, p. 59.

By showing that man is incapable of love without divine guidance, Dobell indirectly expresses in Balder the view common to the Spasmodics-- God is love. Amy loves her child, but Dobell presents this love as an incomplete, godless love that takes away the strength of both mother and child. Dobell shows that Balder, too, is incapable of any depth of love; Balder does not look to God, but rather, seeks only vain fame. Without love, and thus, God, neither character can live. Man, says Dobell, must love:

Love on, love on, for Love is all in all!¹³

Dobell shares Smith and Bailey's view that love is all-important. He says,

. . . while the moons of time shall fill and wane,
While there is earth below and heaven above,
Wherever man is true and woman fair,
Through all the circling cycles Love is Love!
And when the stars have flower'd and fall'n away,
And of this earthly ball
A little dust upon eternity
Is all that shall remain,
Love shall be Love¹⁴

It must be remembered, however, that despite Dobell's comments about the importance of love, his characters remain unable to experience the glorious love that both Walter and Festus find at the end of "A Life

¹³Sydney Dobell, The Poems of Sydney Dobell: Selected with an Introductory Memoir (London, n. d.), p. 287.

¹⁴Ibid.

Drama" and Festus. Dobell states his views on the nature and role of evil somewhat more clearly, though, than he does his views on love.

Dobell uses Balder to illustrate the evil inherent in a selfish lust for fame, for this is the compelling force that drives Balder to his every act of self-destruction. Balder uses this lust for fame, which he often considers to be his predestined path to immortality, as the reason for all of his actions. Thus, he must learn of Death to achieve immortality, a process which eventually brings him to murder. Balder mournfully describes the evil within him:

. . . Vain labour to vain end.
 Even let them gorge their full. My pride is carrion
 And stinks to be devoured. Hie in you hell-dogs
 And split your hides! There is no good in me;
 Why cavil in what fashion I shall wear
 The necessary evil of an essence
 Inexorably bad? If that which lives
 In this detested arm had warmed the sap
 And swelled the branches of some innocent tree,
 A murderer would have plucked it.¹⁵

Despite Balder's unhappy condition at the end of Part I, however, it is likely that if the work had been completed, Balder would have eventually found God, for Dobell ". . . intended to concentrate and personify the spiritual maladies of his time, eventually bringing [Balder] from doubt to faith."¹⁶ Thus, Dobell has presented the view of evil common to the

¹⁵Nichol, p. 278.

¹⁶Miles, p. 212.

Spasmodics--man must know evil to know good. The growth of this idea throughout Spasmodic poetry is an interesting one, for it reflects the Spasmodic tendency to exaggerate an idea rather than to develop it.

Philip Bailey certainly bemoaned the evil in the world, and Festus was tempted by sin, to a degree. Festus learned of great evils through his close contact with Lucifer, but basically, Festus learned of evil without actually embodying it. Alexander Smith also moaned about the evil in the world, and Walter in "A Life Drama" needed to learn of evil by achieving the fame that results from selfish ambition before he was able to know the good of doing God's work. Walter occasionally felt that there was evil within him, but this was balanced by his ability to love. Dobell, on the other hand, created Balder as an embodiment of evil and elaborated on the evil that Walter and Festus learned while on the path to God by having Balder actually commit a murder. Dobell's elaboration on the concept that knowledge of evil leads to God becomes an unintentional satire through its absurdity, although Aytoun far surpasses even Dobell when he has Firmilian kill thousands of people in his quest for knowledge, and thus, for immortality.

Since each of the three Spasmodic poets considered himself to be divinely inspired, it is natural that each believed in a divine power. Bailey and Smith both remained relatively humbled before this power. They created their characters to believe in the Christian God and to believe

that Poetry was the means by which they could serve Him. As has been previously noted, Dobell also felt that it was his duty to speak God's words, but he, more than the other members of the school, boldly set forth through Balder the belief that "chosen" men possess and must use God-like powers, even without divine guidance. Balder, like his Romantic predecessors, only with even more emotion, does not strive for immortality; he already possesses it. Balder has been "chosen":

. . . That I should do it,
 And be the king of men, and on the inform
 And perishable substance of the time
 Beget a better world, I have believed
 Up thro' my mystic years, since in that hour
 Of young and unforgotten extacy
 I put my question to the universe,
 And overhead the beech-trees murmured "Yes."¹⁷

Since Balder has been chosen, he desires to wield his superior talents as would a god and lusts for the opportunity to do so:

That bard who lies
 Like the old knight i' the picture, at the root
 Of our hereditary tree, (first sire
 Of the long line where Shakspeare is not last)
 And by his posture measures height with none,
 Beheld a "House of Fame." For me, I seek
 A sterner architecture and a dome
 More like the heavens, upon that hill which he
 Who climbs is strongest among living men,
 The seat of templed Power. Not Fame but Power.
 Or Fame but as the noise of Power, a voice
 That in the face is wind, but in the ear
 Truth, Knowledge, Wisdom, Question, Speculation,
 Hope, Fear, Love, Hate, Belief, Doubt, Faith, Despair

¹⁷Nichol, pp. 16-17.

Every strong gust that shifts the sails of man,
 And so far worth the utterance; . . .

 . . . Not Fame, but Power.
 Power like a god's, and wielded as a god!¹⁸

That Balder did not thrive while wielding this power on earth indicated that Dobell did not sanction a philosophy of complete freedom of action for the chosen man, but that he believed that he was divinely inspired indicates that he shared Bailey and Smith's belief in immortality.

Dobell says as little as Alexander Smith does concerning the nature of an after-life, but he shows belief in the existence of one in Amy's wishes for death and describes a rather conventional Heaven through her mouth:

That I might die, and be at rest, O God!
 That I might die and sleep the sleep of peace!
 That I might die and know the balm of death
 Cool thro' my limbs and all my silenced heart!
 O God, that I might die, that I might die!¹⁹

 Ah Heaven! they sleep upon the flowery banks,
 And daylight flowers fill them with honey-dreams,
 And pleased smiles do light their languid lips.

 Ah! Heaven! they lie beside the living stream,
 And the superfluous stream o'er-wells his banks,
 And laps sweet waters to their happy lips.

 Where they do most enjoy my need is worst;
 The living cup they spill would save my life;
 The joy that wearies them would give me rest.²⁰

¹⁸Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 232.

²⁰Ibid., p. 192.

A picture of the conventional Christian heaven, then, is combined with a belief in the absolute supremacy of the individual, with no attempt to reconcile the two.

The bewildering effect of Dobell's ideas is intensified by his use of Spasmodic style. Guided by a firm belief that unrestrained exercise of the imagination is the only source of true poetry, he created grossly uneven, often ridiculous lines. Aytoun had difficulty exaggerating such lines as the following when he wrote his burlesque. Balder describes a battle:

At first a roar of warning, "To the north!"
Then like the shriek of all a ravished land,
"O Europe, Europe, Europe, Europe, Europe!"
And then like the world's trumpet blown to war,
"The North, the North, the North, the North, the
North!"²¹

Dobell wrote two volumes of poems after the publication of Balder, Part I: Sonnets on the War (1855), in which he collaborated with Smith, and England in Time of War (1856). Both volumes were received negatively, even though they were somewhat better, ostensibly because of Aytoun's previous attack. It is most likely, however, that the public was ready for a change from Spasmodic emotionalism. As John Nichol notes,

The whole Spasmodic school had sprung into existence; we had had the "Life Drama"--Gerald Massey--"Night and the Soul"--Poems by Quallon--hosts of rhapsodies, as vague as dreams, and not half so natural; plays of the new order, where

²¹ Ibid., p. 50.

some one talked about his feelings and fate, through scores of dreary pages, with "a pause," "a long pause," and "a very long pause;" or held parley with the most patient of beauties, in most interminable dialogues, broken up by most unmeaning ditties. No wonder that we were in no very favourable mood to receive Mr Dobell's new volume, or that its remarkable power and originality were too soon lost sight of in an exaggerated appreciation of its defects.²²

Balder's utmost expression of despair, uttered even while he is seeking comfort from the skies, is aptly referred to by Jerome Buckley as

" . . . the most remarkable line in blank verse"²³ Balder cries:

You white full heavens!
You crowded heavens that mine eyes lift but now
Shining and void and azure!--

Ah! ah! ah!
Ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah!²⁴

Dobell reaches the epitome of Spasmodism and thus marks the end of the Spasmodic school.

²²John Nichol, Fragments of Criticism (Edinburgh, 1860), p. 91.

²³Jerome Hamilton Buckley, The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture (New York, 1964), p. 56.

²⁴Nichol, The Poetical Works of Sydney Dobell, p. 260.

CHAPTER V

SPASMODIC WORKS OF MAJOR VICTORIAN POETS

The Spasmodic style is evident not only in the poetry of members of the Spasmodic school, but in the poetry of some major Victorian writers as well. As Robert Birley notes, "One of the greatest disadvantages of reading Bailey is that afterwards one is constantly noticing passages in the great Victorian poets which could be incorporated into Festus without questions asked."¹ Jack Lindsay, a British critic and biographer of George Meredith says that not only are there Spasmodic passages in the works of the Spasmodics' contemporaneous writers, but that almost any poet who wrote at this time could be called a Spasmodic.² Although Lindsay's statement may be valid in a general sense, a distinction should be made between the Spasmodic poet and the poet whose writings reflect elements of Spasmodic style. Spasmodic poets, as has been seen, wrote without discipline of thought because they believed that they were divinely inspired. They had unqualified

¹Robert Birley, Sunk Without Trace: Some Forgotten Masterpieces Reconsidered (New York, 1963), p. 205.

²Letter from Jack Lindsay, British literary critic, Castle Hedingham, Halstead, Essex, May 14, 1965.

faith in their powers and therefore treated the themes of love, evil, and immortality in a lofty manner, never questioning the validity of their ideas in terms of the mundane world. The major writers, in contrast, generally weighed their ideas against their perception of the actual conditions in their world and thus disciplined their thoughts by means of genuine questioning. Although they believed as the Spasmodics did in the importance of the poet's task and his responsibility for expressing the "truth," they believed that they needed to search for this truth and could not simply consider their unrestrained thoughts as messages from God.

The Spasmodic elements in poems of major Victorian writers thus can be seen more clearly in their style of writing than in their ideas. As has been seen in the works of Bailey, Smith, and Dobell, Spasmodic style is characterized by a lack of restraint which results in lengthy, highly emotional poems. These poems deal with tragic subjects, usually with loss of love; but because they lack either the tension or the lyrical perfection necessary to attain tragic dimension, they are not actually tragedies. Most evident in Spasmodic poetry is a frequent repetition of words, over-use of punctuation, inflexibly elevated diction, and elaborate, stereotyped imagery. These elements of style are strikingly present in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "Maud," and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh, both of which were published during

the 1850's, the time when Alexander Smith and Sydney Dobell were publishing their Spasmodic dramas.

Tennyson is reported as saying upon the publication of Festus that ". . . he could scarcely trust himself to say how much he admired it for fear of falling into extravagance."³ But it appears that Tennyson admitted his affinity for Festus, and later for other Spasmodic works, for he published "Maud" in 1855, a lengthy narrative poem that is essentially Spasmodic. Edmund Gosse comments on Tennyson's relationship with the Spasmodic school and on the particular influence which Sydney Dobell exerted on him:

. . . Perhaps the most interesting fact connected with Sydney Dobell was the extraordinary and temporary influence which he exercised over Tennyson, already famous and fifteen years his senior. It was a remarkable impetus which led the foremost writer of the day to enrol himself for a moment among the Spasmodist writers of monodramatic lyrics During the long years when the Tennysonian idolatry was rampant this relationship was carefully ignored, and has never been properly examined, but the point is one deserving critical attention. The Spasmodists adored Apollo in an absurd chapel, but Tennyson worshipped there with them in 1854.⁴

Tennyson expresses the introspective thoughts of an embittered young man in "Maud," a loosely structured narrative poem that resembles the Spasmodic drama with the exception of assigning parts to characters.

³"Philip James Bailey," The Athaenæm (September 13, 1902), p. 350.

⁴Sir Edmund Gosse, "The Centenary of a Spasmodist," Silhouettes (London, 1925), pp. 333-334.

Tennyson uses rhymed iambic lines with a consistency not found in the Spasmodic dramas, but he frequently interjects variations which create the unevenness typical of Spasmodic works. The speaker's soul-searchings are as emotional as are Balder's and are expressed with equal lack of restraint.

Embittered and incapable of love at the beginning of the narrative, the speaker bemoans the essential evil in man, and thus, in the world. He says,

Ah, what shall I be at fifty
Should Nature keep me alive,
If I find the world so bitter
When I am but twenty-five?⁵

He resolves to escape from the mundane world into the world of books, but this only causes him to feel more lonely, and thus, more bitter. Hope comes to the speaker, however, as it does to other Spasmodic protagonists, in the form of love. The speaker remembers a woman, Maud, whom he knew as a young child and becomes nostalgic about her memory. He sees her by chance one day and begins to think of the possibilities of a better world:

Then the world were not so bitter
But a smile could make it sweet.⁶

⁵ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, The Poetical Works of Alfred Tennyson (New York, n. d.), p. 233.

⁶ Ibid., p. 225.

He is cautious at first in admitting his love for Maud, although his thoughts are constantly of her; but when he once touches her hand, he is helplessly consumed with his love for her and finds the world a rosy place:

Rosy is the West,
 Rosy is the South,
 Roses are her cheeks,
 And a rose her mouth.⁷

But this ecstasy does not last long; it does not last for any Spasmodic. The speaker has finally been able to arrange a garden rendezvous with Maud, and after lengthy, excited doubts about her arrival, she appears. But before they have an opportunity to exchange anything more than a loving greeting, Maud's brother, who "gorgonizes" the speaker with an "icy British stare"⁸ and one of Maud's suitors appear in the garden. Maud's brother challenges the speaker to a duel, and in a fit of rage, the speaker kills the brother. Thus, despite their undying love for each other, the speaker and Maud can never be married. After a period of solitary despair, the speaker longs for the arms of his "true love to be round him once again,"⁹ but that can never be.

With the loss of his love dark on his heart, the speaker once again bemoans the evil in man, with even louder moans than he had previously uttered. He exclaims:

⁷Ibid., p. 229.

⁸Ibid., p. 228.

⁹Ibid., p. 237.

Arise, my God, and strike, for we hold Thee just,
 Strike dead the whole weak race of venomous worms,
 That sting each other here in the dust;
 We are not worthy to live.¹⁰

The speaker wants to die, but is forced to continue existing in a living death:

DEAD, long dead,
 Long dead!
 And my heart is a handful of dust,
 And the wheels go over my head,
 And my bones are shaken with pain,
 And into a shallow grave they are thrust,
 Only a yard beneath the street,
 And the hoofs of the horses beat, beat,
 And the hoofs of the horses beat,
 Beat into my scalp and my brain,
 With never an end to the stream of
 passing feet,
 Driving, hurrying, marrying, burying,
 Clamor and rumble, and ringing and clatter,
 And here beneath it is all is bad,
 For I thought the dead had peace, but it
 is not so;
 To have no peace in the grave, is that
 not sad?¹¹

This despair cannot last too long for the Spasmodic, however, and the speaker finds his hope in the service of God. Since this speaker is not a poet, and since his country is at war, he finds that God's work lies in the service of his country. He believes that he can improve mankind through war:

¹⁰Ibid., p. 235.

¹¹Ibid., p. 238.

. . . God's just wrath shall be wreak'd
 on a giant liar;

 For the peace, that I deemed no peace, is
 over and done,

 It is better to fight for the good, than
 to rail at the ill;
 I have felt with my native land, I am
 one with my kind,
 I embrace the purpose of God, and the
 doom assign'd.¹²

It can thus be seen that "Maud," like the Spasmodic dramas, has as its main theme a consideration of the nature of love. It is significant, however, that the speaker finds that the most satisfying form of expression of love is in giving service to his country. Thus, Tennyson shows concern with an actual problem confronting his age, the Crimean war, at the same time as he shows concern with the abstract theme of love. He reconciles his belief in the all-importance of love with worldly problems by showing that love can be meaningfully channeled into love for his country.

Tennyson also expresses his awareness of evil in man with equal emotional intensity to the Spasmodics, but as in his treatment of love, he describes evil in terms of actual observations more often than they do. Rather than just calling man evil, Tennyson describes the nature of the hypocrisy that he believes makes man evil. In one of the more sensitive

¹²Ibid., pp. 240-241.

passages in "Maud," a passage in which Tennyson achieves the genuinely biting tone that the Spasmodic poet does not quite reach, Tennyson decries the hypocritical pacifist:

Last week came one to the country town,
 To preach our poor little army down,

 This broad-brim'd hawker of holy things,
 Whose ear is stuff'd with his cotton,
 and rings
 Even in dreams to the chink of his pence,
 This huckster put down war! can he tell
 Whether war be a cause or a consequence?¹³

Tennyson also suggests a way that all men, not just the Spasmodic poet-hero, can work to remove the evil from the world. Rather than setting oneself against war, he says,

Put down the passions that make earth Hell!
 Down with ambition, avarice, pride,
 Jealousy, down! cut off from the mind
 The bitter springs of anger and fear;
 Down too, down at your own fireside,
 With the evil tongue and the evil ear,
 For each is at war with mankind.¹⁴

In "Maud," Tennyson deals with the problems of this life, rather than with the problems of an eternal life that are commonly emphasized by the Spasmodics. It is in style, more than in theme, that "Maud" is Spasmodic. Tennyson uses Spasmodic excesses in abundance, for he, like Bailey, Smith, and Dobell, often becomes so involved in the sounds

¹³Ibid., p. 226.

¹⁴Ibid.

of words that he seems to disregard meaning in his choice of them. Repetition of words, piles of adjectives, and abundant alliteration can be seen throughout "Maud." While loving Maud from a distance, the speaker wonders:

Cold and clear-cut face, why come you so cruelly meek,¹⁵

He describes his memory of Maud's beauty:

Growing and fading and growing upon me without
a sound,
Luminous, gemlike, ghostlike, deathlike, half the
night long
Growing and fading and growing, till I could bear
it no more.¹⁶

This infatuation with words tends to cloud both the meaning and the mood that Tennyson seeks to express in "Maud."

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh also contains Spasmodic elements. Jerome Buckley comments that ". . . Aurora Leigh (1856), more than any of her other efforts, throbbled with a Spasmodic faith in the poet's mission and the sanctity of subjective impulse."¹⁷ Beginning with Aurora Leigh's birth to an Italian mother and British father, Elizabeth Barrett Browning describes Aurora's life as an aspiring poetess. Aurora is raised by a matron British aunt who gives her only

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 221.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 222.

¹⁷ Jerome Hamilton Buckley, The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture (New York, 1964), p. 62.

material security and an education designed to make Aurora a proper Victorian wife. Aurora is able to rebel against this education only because she discovers her father's library. She exclaims:

Books, books, books!
 I had found the secret of a garret-room
 Piled high with cases in my father's name;
 Piled high, packed large, --where, creeping in and out
 Among the giant fossils of my past,
 Like some small nimble mouse between the ribs
 Of a mastodon, I nibbled here and there
 At this or that box, pulling through the gap,
 In heats of terror, haste, victorious joy,
 The first book first. And how I felt it beat
 Under my pillow, in the morning's dark,
 An hour before the sun would let me read!
 My books!¹⁸

She considers the "world of books"¹⁹ to be as real as any world,

And both worlds have God's providence, thank God!²⁰

But closest to God for Aurora Leigh, as for any Spasmodic, is the poet.

She refers to poets as

. . . the only truth-tellers, now left to God, --
 The only speakers of essential truth,
 Opposed to relative, comparative,
 And temporal truths; the only holders by
 His sun-skirts, through conventional grey glooms;
 The only teachers who instruct mankind,
 From just a shadow on a charnel wall,
 To find man's veritable stature out,

¹⁸Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh: A Poem in Nine Books (New York, 1890), p. 27.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 26.

²⁰Ibid.

Erect, sublime, --the measure of a man,
 And that's the measure of an angel, says
 The apostle.²¹

The major conflict that Aurora encounters with her aspirations to poetic height is in her love for a mortal, her cousin Romney Leigh.

Romney represents the practical man, the Utilitarian of her age:

. . . Always Romney Leigh
 Was looking for the worms, I for the gods.²²

Aurora Leigh struggles with her love for Romney throughout the verse-novel, torn in her conflict between the poet's idealistic concept of love and the flaws in mortal love, a conflict frequently expressed by the Spasmodics. In speaking to a woman who is also in love with her cousin, Aurora expresses her feelings about love:

I love love! truth's no cleaner thing than love.
 I comprehend a love so fiery hot
 It burns its natural veil of august shame,
 And stands sublimely in the nude, as chaste
 As Medicean Venus. But I know,
 A love that burns through veils, will burn through
 masks,
 And shrivel up treachery. What, love and lie!
 Nay--²³

Aurora continues to be tormented by her love for Romney; she feels the loneliness and apartness from the world of the artist and is embittered by this feeling for a while:

²¹Ibid., p. 28.

²²Ibid., p. 18.

²³Ibid., p. 100.

Love you say?
 My lord, I cannot love. I only find
 The rhymes for love, --and that's not love, my lord.²⁴

She feels sometimes that love of men is of ultimate importance:

. . . since
 We needs must hunger, --better, for man's love,
 Than God's truth! better, for companions sweet,
 Than great convictions!²⁵

But at other times, her concept of love is more abstract, romantically expanded to equate love with nature:

. . . love
 Includes the whole of nature, rounding it
 To love . . . no more, --since more can never be
 Than just love.²⁶

Aurora also sees tremendous importance in maternal love throughout Aurora Leigh, sometimes considering it the only real love. As a result of this all-consuming search for meaning in love, Aurora discovers that the only real Love is that which is God's. She expresses this concept of love in a passage that could be the conclusion of any one of the Spasmodic dramas:

. . . Art is much, but love is more.
 O Art, my Art, thou'rt much, but Love is more!
 Art symbolises heaven, but Love is God
 And makes heaven.²⁷

²⁴Ibid., p. 186.

²⁵Ibid., p. 172.

²⁶Ibid., p. 217.

²⁷Ibid., p. 341.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning expresses the feeling common to the Spasmodics--God is Love.

It would be misleading, however, to consider Aurora Leigh purely as a Spasmodic poem because much of the discussion in it is concerned with concrete problems confronting individuals living during the early part of the Victorian period. As Jerome Buckley notes,

There were . . . elements in Aurora Leigh quite alien to Spasmodic art. The will to approach social issues directly, the emphasis on immediate human values, the scorn of the aesthete's recourse to poetic imagery derived far less from the School of Gilfillan than from the "anti-romantic" preachments of Carlyle and Kingsley.²⁸

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's discussions of the education of Victorian women; her commentaries on the inhuman working conditions in factories and on the callousness of the rich; and her occasional awareness of the staggering effects of science are all elements that make Aurora Leigh more than a Spasmodic tragedy. The combination of these practical comments with lofty discussions of the nature of love, however, creates a bulky, uneven work that is much like the Spasmodic's dramatic poems.

Aurora Leigh expresses the view on art that creates such a work:

. . . Trust the spirit,
As Sovran nature does, to make the form;
For otherwise we only imprison spirit,
And not embody.²⁹

²⁸Buckley, p. 62.

²⁹Browning, p. 164.

Although she later qualifies this statement by saying,

There's more than passion goes to make a man,
Or book, which is a man too,³⁰

her style of writing often reflects lack of restraint. As Buckley says, Mrs. Browning ". . . retained the highly emotional attitude towards aesthetic and religious problems which characterized the work of many younger Spasmodics."³¹ Although Mrs. Browning generally describes the causes for Aurora Leigh's emotional reactions, there are times when she just sits back and utters a Spasmodic "Alas! Alas!"³² or "Alas, and woe to us."³³ She also occasionally expresses Spasmodic ecstasy:

But oh, the night! oh, bitter-sweet! oh, sweet!
O dark, O moon and stars, O ecstasy
Of darkness! O great mystery of love,--
In which absorbed, loss, anguish, treason's self
Enlarges rapture,--as a pebble dropt
In some full wine-cup, over-brims the wine!³⁴

It can therefore be seen that Elizabeth Barrett Browning felt tremendous affinity for the Spasmodic school of poets and that she expressed this feeling in Aurora Leigh, which she considered to be the work ". . . into

³⁰Ibid., p. 169.

³¹Buckley, p. 62.

³²Browning, p. 15.

³³Ibid., p. 262.

³⁴Ibid., p. 346.

which her highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered."³⁵

The existence of two such predominantly Spasmodic poems in the writings of two major Victorian poets indicates that either the Spasmodic poets exerted strong influence on their contemporaries, or that there was a general need at the beginning of the Victorian period for Spasmodic expression of feeling. Tennyson's publication of "Maud" while he was Poet Laureate tends to indicate that there was a need for this emotional exuberance in poetry at the time, a need expressed both by the artist and by the public.

³⁵Ibid., Dedication.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Spasmodic writing, as has been seen, is a pulsating affirmation of the poet's belief in his divinely inspired powers--a belief that the solution to the world's problems is to be found within the poet's mind. This writing is the work of individuals suspended in the early Victorian era--individuals who felt the bewilderment of their age without ever understanding its cause. While major Victorian poets tried to cope with this bewilderment through observations and questioning of existing conditions, the Spasmodics looked inward for their answers. The resulting introspective works gave expression to the emotions that the Victorians felt, but did not add anything to an understanding of the source of these emotions.

The Victorian Spasmodics were young; their ideas and style of writing were not mature and were not developing further because of their essentially non-intellectual nature. In the passion of youth they became attached to the passionate British Romantic style, a style created in a different intellectual climate than that of their own age. While the British Romantic poets had based their emotional outbursts

on considered ideas, the Spasmodics shared only their emotion and imitated the outbursts without their underlying thought. The intense subjectivity of the Spasmodics hindered them from seeing that if they 'were to realize their own vitality, they had to strike out in new directions; they had to discover their own styles, forms, and critical standards."¹ Thus, while the Spasmodics were steeped in an exaggeratedly Romantic world, "the Victorian era rapidly recognized its proper spokesmen in writers who were strenuously conscious of Victorian problems."² While the Victorians found sympathy with their problems in Spasmodic poetry and therefore received these works enthusiastically, they found no enlightenment in them, no more insight than they had already possessed, and therefore eventually rejected them.

¹Jerome Hamilton Buckley, The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture (New York, 1964), p. 17.

²Ibid.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

- Aytoun, William Edmondstoune, Poems of William Edmondstoune Aytoun, edited by F. Page, London, Oxford University Press, 1921.
- Bailey, Philip James, The Age; A Colloquial Satire, London, Chapman and Hall, 1858.
- _____, The Angel World and Other Poems, London, W. Pickering, 1850.
- _____, "The Author of Festus and the Spasmodic School," Literary Anecdotes of the 19th Century: Contributions Towards a Literary History of the Period, Vol. II, edited by W. Robertson Nicoll and Thomas J. Wise (2 volumes), London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1895-96.
- _____, Festus, London, Chapman and Hall, 1854.
- _____, The Mystic and Other Poems, Boston, Ticknor and Fields, 1856.
- Battenhouse, Henry M., English Romantic Writers, New York, Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1958.
- Birley, Robert, Sunk Without Trace: Some Forgotten Masterpieces Reconsidered, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963.
- Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, Aurora Leigh: A Poem in Nine Books, New York, Worthington Co., 1890.
- Buchanan, Robert, A Look Round Literature, London, Ward and Downey, 1887.
- Buckley, Jerome Hamilton, The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture, New York, Vintage Books, 1964.

- Bush, Douglas, English Poetry: The Main Currents from Chaucer to the Present, New York, Oxford University Press, 1963.
- Cruse, Amy, The Victorians and Their Reading, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935.
- Dobell, Sydney, "Clay and Bronze," Foundations of English Style, edited by Paul M. Fulcher, New York, F. S. Crofts & Co., 1928.
- Dobell, Mrs. Sydney, The Poems of Sydney Dobell: Selected with an Introductory Memoir, London, Walter Scott Limited, n. d.
- Fogle, Richard Harter, editor, John Keats: Selected Poetry and Letters, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962.
- Gilfillan, George, A Gallery of Literary Portraits, edited by W. Robertson Nicoll, London, J. M. Dent & Co., n. d.
- _____, Specimens With Memoirs of the Less-Known British Poets (3 volumes), Edinburgh, James Nichol, 1860.
- Gosse, Sir Edmund, "The Centenary of a Spasmodist," Silhouettes, London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1925.
- Kingsley, Charles, "Alexander Smith and Alexander Pope," Literary and General Essays, London, Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1898.
- Miles, Alfred H., editor, The Poets and the Poetry of the Nineteenth Century, Vols. IV and V (10 volumes), London, George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1905.
- Nichol, John, Fragments of Criticism, Edinburgh, Ballantyne and Company, 1860.
- _____, editor, The Poetical Works of Sydney Dobell (2 volumes), London, Smith, Elder, & Co., 1875.
- Patmore, Coventry, "Poetical Coups-Manqués," Courage in Politics and Other Essays, London, Oxford University Press, 1921.
- Smith, Alexander, City Poems, Cambridge, Macmillan and Co., 1857.
- _____, Poems, Boston, Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1854.

Tennyson, Alfred Lord, The Poetical Works of Alfred Tennyson, New York, Hurst & Company, n. d.

Winter, William, Old Friends: Being Literary Recollections of Other Days, New York, Moffat, Yard and Company, 1909.

Woodberry, George, Literary Memoirs of the 19th Century, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1921.

Wordsworth, William, "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads," A Grammar of Literary Criticism, edited by Lawrence Sargeant Hall, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1965.

Young, G. M., Victorian England: Portrait of an Age, London, Oxford University Press, 1963.

Articles

"Alexander Smith," The Times Literary Supplement, XXIX (December 25, 1930), 1098.

"Balder," Fraser's Magazine, L (July, 1854), 61-73.

Black, Greta A., "P. J. Bailey's Debt to Goethe's 'Faust' In His 'Festus,'" Modern Language Review, XXVIII (April, 1933), 166-175.

Couling, Sidney, "Matthew Arnold's 1853 Preface: Its Origin and Aftermath," Victorian Studies, VII (March, 1964), 233-263.

Gosse, Sir Edmund, "Philip James Bailey," The Fortnightly Review, CCCCXXXI (November 1, 1902), 759-775.

Grimsditch, Herbert B., "Alexander Smith: Poet and Essayist," London Mercury, XII (July, 1925), 284-294.

McKillop, Alan D., "A Victorian Faust," Publications of the Modern Language Association, XL (1925), 743-768.

"Philip James Bailey," The Athenæum (September 13, 1902), 350.

"Poems By Alexander Smith," North American Review, CLX (July, 1853), 1-11.

Unpublished Materials

**Lindsay, Jack, British literary critic, personal letter, Castle
Hedingham, Halstead, Essex, May 14, 1965.**