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Sydney Dobell: Sunk without Trace

Who can account for the changes in literary tastes? Why is it that what was valued in a former age ceases to be esteemed in a latter one? Conversely, why is it that what at a future date might be hailed as brilliantly insightful, thereto, was totally neglected? These questions certainly arise when one considers the poetic reputation of Sydney Dobell and the Spasmodics. Dobell is now little more than a footnote in the annals of English literature—and the Spasmodics are nothing but a vulgar burp after the glorious intoxication of the Romantics.¹ Yet, Dobell had worked out his own theory on “equivalents” long before Eliot’s “objective correlative.”² And the Spasmodics’ influence on nineteenth-century poetics, especially in their unique emphasis on the Poet as living “on the edge of things,” is yet to be evaluated.

Victorian literary critics have a lopsided tendency to concentrate on the poets writing after 1850 and to ignore entirely the Spasmodic controversy. First, then—briefly—let me situate Sydney Dobell in the history of Spasmodism, a history which began when Henry Taylor published his anti-Romantic Manifesto in 1824—the year in which Byron died and Sydney Dobell was born. Poetry was undergoing a particularly “flat” time after the death of Byron.³ In his Preface to *Philip Van Artevelde*, which is now remembered while the play itself is forgotten, Taylor called on young poets to free themselves from the pernicious influences of Byron and Shelley who were condemned for their “unbounded indulgence in the mere luxuries of poetry.”⁴ They lacked “subject matter,” Taylor expostulated as he stirred up his anti-romantic forces; they had “little concern with what [was] rational or wise” (xii). Nor was Taylor alone in his distrust of imagination. One has only to remember Thomas Peacock’s *Four Ages of Poetry* in which he deprecated sentiment as “canting egotism in the mask of refined feeling,” and passion as “the commotion of a weak and selfish mind.”⁵ Or of Isaac Taylor’s warning to beware the dangerous depiction of “solitary and unsocial indulgence.”⁶ And Taylor was aided and

abetted by John Keble, the inspiring Anglican Divine, who in his *De Poetica Vi Medica Praelectiones Academicæ* condemned Byron.⁷ No wonder Edmund Gosse in characterizing literature in the reign of William IV, wrote that it formed "a small belt or streak of the most colorless, drawn across our variegated intellectual chronicle."⁸ A poetic quietism marked the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

Sydney Dobell's poetic apprenticeship, then, was passed in that lull which was to precede a storm. Henry Taylor had given two new commandments to poets of the second quarter of the nineteenth century: Thou shalt worship reason, thy lord and god, and thou shalt not exhibit extreme passion. The commands held for at least five years. Then, in 1839, Philip Bailey (1816-1902)—a name with which Sydney Dobell's would henceforth be associated—published *Festus*.⁹ This poem marked the dawn of Spasmodism which struggled to keep alive the Romantic bequest characterized by consciousness of the subjective, imperial self and birthmarked by passion and riotous, exuberant, imagination.

Bailey was only twenty-three years old when he published his spectacular poem, which was to go through eleven editions in England and thirty in the United States. *Festus* has an extremely simple plot and consists chiefly of long debates between Lucifer and Festus. But what *is* rather extraordinary—Bailey has Lucifer redeemed! The devil turns out to be not a hateful source of corruption and violence, but rather the victimized "hit man" of history.

The 1839 edition of the poem did not at first catch fire.¹⁰ But then Thomas Pickering brought out a second edition of Bailey's *Festus* (1845) in which he advertized every snippet of favorable criticism he could gather.¹¹ Tennyson had written to Edward Fitzgerald that *Festus* contained "really very grand things."¹² He further avowed that these "grand things" were "grander than anything he had written."¹³ Critics saw echoes of Carlyle's "natural supernaturalism" in *Festus* with a generous dose of universalism and a new note of optimism.¹⁴

Sydney Dobell was fifteen when *Festus* was published. His biographer claimed that he considered reading the poem a "literary banquet"—a banquet which must have been devoured by a child brought up in a strict, even crankish religious tradition.¹⁵ His grandfather, Samuel Thompson, was the founder of a church based on primitive Christianity—a group whose spirit has been immortalized in the opening pages of George Eliot's *Silas Marner*. Dobell appears to have had one of those formidable educations in which Victorians took such pride. At four or five his father would give him a line to which the

child would respond in rhyme. At ten Sydney's first poem was privately printed and for the next fifteen years the young Sydney continued working in his father's wine business, marrying when he was barely twenty years of age and writing poetry which was published mostly in religious magazines.¹⁶ Then Sydney Dobell came in contact with George Gilfillan.

In the craze following *Festus*, George Gilfillan (1813-1878), a minister editor from Scotland, called on new poets, the "rising sons of morning" as he called them, to baptize the romanticism anathematized by Henry Taylor.¹⁷ Gilfillan, although little heard of now, had an astonishing critical following in the periodicals of the day. "It may be doubted," wrote W. Robertson Nicoll, in referring to his influence, "whether even Carlyle had more power over young minds than Gilfillan."¹⁸ He looked towards the poets to propagate the new spiritual romanticism.¹⁹ To Gilfillan, more than to any other man, Sydney Dobell owed his rapid rise to literary prominence and his even more rapid demise.

In July of 1848 Gilfillan printed in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* extracts from the first scene of *The Roman*, Dobell's first major poem, which Dobell had sent him. A correspondence had already begun between the two men and Gilfillan's support would never desert the young poet. When Dobell went up to London, he went armed with letters of introduction from Gilfillan to Leigh Hunt and, more significantly, to Thomas Carlyle. Within the year after the publication of *The Roman*, Dobell was considered an established poet. There is no doubt that without George Gilfillan's backing, Sydney Dobell might well have been an unknown minister in the Church of Free-thinking Christians rather than a neglected member of the Spasmodic poets.

Dobell then brought out his master work *Balder* toward the end of 1853. He imposed upon himself an almost impossible task in *Balder*. He attempted to de-mythologize a male-dominated culture, to dramatize a divided consciousness and, perhaps most significantly, to invigorate poetry by metaphoric language which followed the untrammelled path of free association. He succeeded only in infuriating critics who entirely misconstrued his aims.

Balder is the victim of an unbridled egoism which led him to think that only by allowing himself complete freedom to plumb the depth of all knowledge and experience—knowing death, possibly even knowing the ultimate power of murder in the killing of his wife—could he transcend the limits of mortality by writing about the unwritable. However, in exploring the dark recesses of his own egoism, Balder

comes to a deeper awareness of his own humanity and of the complementarism between the sexes.

Because the action of the poem is internal, chiefly in the mind of Balder, Dobell effectively dramatizes mental progressions by blurring precise limitations of time and space in the elimination of formal act divisions. But Dobell brilliantly structures the play as a symbolic struggle on three, highly complex, concentric levels—the psychological, the social and the personal. Symbolically the struggle is represented in the contrasting characters of Balder and his wife Amy who are imaged by the rocks and flowers of the first scene which, in turn, dramatically presents the incompatibility of the demands made by reason and imagination and also those made by egoism and feminism. Thus the rocks of the tower in which Balder dwells image the forces of reason and experience, the masculine world of the protagonist, while flowers, trees and water delineate the female world of sensitivity and subservience—a subservience which Amy will subsequently reject.

As the poem opens, Balder is in his tower study surrounded by books, manuscripts and statues—all testaments to reason's (and the male's) domination. A window overlooks a country valley and an open door leads to another room, Amy's, which is never seen. The setting underlines Amy's lack of place, of identity and of function. Balder's tower, a male image, signifies power and control. He has the first (and last) words of the play.

Tomorrow I count thirty years, save one.
 Ye grey stones
 Of this old tower gloomy and ruinous,
 Wherein I make mine eyrie as an eagle
 Among the rocks; stones, valleys, mountains, trees,
 In which I dwell content as in a nest
 Of Beauty,—comprehended less by more—
 Or above which I rise, as a great ghost
 Out of its mortal hull; vale, mountains, trees,
 And stones of home, which, as in some old tale
 O' the East keep interchange of prodigies
 With me, and now contain me and anon
 Are stomached by mine hunger, unappeased
 That sucks Creation down, and o'er the void
 Still gapes for more; ye whom I love and fear
 And worship, or i' the hollow of my hand
 Throw like a grain of incense up to heaven,
 Tell me your secrets! That ye have a heart
 I know; but can it beat for such as I?²⁰

Balder's birthday vespers offer nothing of the emotional joys of being a husband and a father. Instead they form a litany of frustrations. Beauty was unattainable: "comprehended less by more." The world of nature—valley, mountains, trees—all "are stomached by mine hunger, unappeased." He, the proud quester, has been thwarted because nature will not reveal its secrets. Balder has a disconcerting sense of nature's exclusiveness. Does nature have consciousness of the poet as the poet has of it? Balder has begun to ask some preposterous questions. He has made natural objects individuals. He speaks to them, prays to them because they have been able to take him out of his common, ordinary world. Ominously, however, he has begun to suspect, even to resent, nature's superiority since he cannot know all her secrets.

From the outset the action of the drama is internal in the minds of the chief actor, Balder, who is aware of his contrarities and responds with acute sensitivity to the delicate changes in consciousness that take place moment by moment. These contrary moods are reflected in the abrupt changes in his image patterns. For example, the tower's window is first "eyelashed with balmy sprays of honeysuckle," but his own eye next catches the "ivy ever sad," then darts to the "midnight bolt" that "starts like a bloody eyeball" (12). The eye imagery reflects his own diseased sight and mirrors his own vacillating moods: awe at nature's wonder, frustration because he cannot comprehend her secrets, then concern for his wife whom he describes as a "delicate flower / In a deserted garden" wherein he has set her like a "wandering clown," and where she is hemmed in by these "unmannered rocks" (11).

This opening scene is convincing in showing Dobell's power in depicting both the actual process of a scrutinized moment in time, and his remarkable power of manipulating language so that it follows the path of free association. Startling metaphors link "stones" to "mountains" to "nest" for eagles. Balder, eagle among men—powerful, lofty, isolated—is also singularly impervious to the affective needs of his wife, the "flower"—delicate, fragrant but grounded in subservience. Vaguely conscious that there is a rupture in his union with nature as there is in his relationship with his wife, in this opening scene Balder questions why "The sweet light is put out in the long rain, / The flower is withered on the wall" (12). His speech is not the language of an ordinary mind expressing ordinary relations. Deficient in the simple, human interests of wife and family, his soliloquy shows him teetering on the brink of a monstrous curiosity that will lead to the bizarre. The

scene also establishes Balder as a serious poet preoccupied with his own destiny and repeating over and over the central question: "have I lived / Not unloved, and shall I pass away / Not all unwept?" (11). In asking these questions Balder's powers are bound to be tempted.

Isolated as Balder is in this first scene, the stage directions indicate that a door in the study communicates with an adjoining room. Immediately after Balder's soliloquy Amy's voice is heard. The physical dissociation of Balder from his wife indicates a deeper separation in their human relationship. Immediately after Balder's soliloquy, Amy's voice, singing of flowers, trees, and defenceless animals, images the female world of emotion and of accommodation. Her first song is a lullaby to her infant daughter.

Amy's is the quiet but disturbed imagination singularly attentive to sounds—detailed sounds of wailing, wild night winds, of rain echoing human tears, of weeping, blighted willows. Hers is a distorted view which is all the more unnatural because of the quiet, soothing, simple rhythm of her lullaby. The very acuteness of her sense of hearing makes her a listener attentive to the voice of despair, while her visual acuity gives her a certain clarity in seeing her husband as he is. But the contrast between the two willows of Amy's song, "one hale, one blighted" (14) is the most unequivocal image of the deep breach between the tenderness of Amy and the demonic hubris of Balder which has led to Amy's neglect. Dobell has endowed Amy with an intuitive insight that balances her husband's arrogant intellectualism. At the outset he allows only Amy's voice to be heard; she is seen on stage only three times in all. In this way Dobell carefully crafts a structure of emotions shifting alternately between Balder's tediously long, philosophic soliloquies and his wife's brief, tender songs. There is a variation in excitement and mood that makes the opening of the play very successful in establishing the suppressed energy of inner conflict, for from the first scene it is clear that Amy and Balder represent two sides of the same psyche.

Dobell was an intuitive psychologist. Nichol, Dobell's editor, seemed to sense as much when he hailed Dobell as the "Poet of the Future" ("Memoir,"; *Poetical Works* 1: xix). Another critic maintained that a future study of the poem would "lead to a fuller acknowledgment of its grandeur."²¹ It is the psychological dimensions of the poem—the alienation of Balder's affective from his intellectual life, the coupling of egoism and feminism—that are most significant and contribute to the untapped power of Dobell's major work.

None of Dobell's poetic aims was appreciated by William Edmondstone Aytoun (1813-1865), a rising editor of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, who had been chafing at the adulation given to the younger poets, and proceeded to pan all Spasmodists, particularly those endorsed by George Gilfillan. Aytoun, under the guise of an editor, claimed to have received a letter from an earnest, young poet, T. Percy Jones, who submitted excerpts from his recent epic, "Firmilian" for critical evaluation. Aytoun (acting as both the editor who received the poem and the poet who wrote the submitted fragments) proceeded to tear to shreds "Firmilian" and all other Spasmodic poems.

It is not very easy to comprehend the exact creed and method of the new school of poets, who have set themselves at work upon a principle hitherto unknown, or at all events unproclaimed. This much we know from themselves, that they regard poetry not only as a sacred calling, but as the most sacred of any . . . that they are to the fainting race of Adam, the sole accredited bearers of the Amreeta cup of immortality. . . . But apart from their exaggerated notions of their calling, let us see what is the practice of poets of the Spasmodic School. In the first place, they rarely, if ever, attempt anything like a plot. . . . In the second place, we regret to say that they are often exceedingly profane, not, as we suppose, intentionally but because they have not sense enough to see the limits which decency, as well as duty, prescribes. In the third place, they are occasionally very prurient. And in the fourth place, they are almost always unintelligible.²²

This is a serious editor writing a sensible critique, but that same editor became a magnificent wit when he pretended to be the adjudicator of T. Percy Jones's *Firmilian*, a full length play published by Aytoun four months after his *Blackwood's* essay.²³

There is no doubt that "the exaggerated notions of their calling" were given the young Spasmodics by George Gilfillan whom Aytoun disguises in the play as the puffy figure of Appolodorus. One of the zaniest episodes of the play occurs in scene X when Appolodorus, a critic, is walking through a square in the neighborhood of Badajoz, praying for new poetic talent. At that instant, the body of Haverillo, slain by Firmilian who wanted to experience remorse, falls on Appolodorus and crushes him.²⁴

Reviewers of *Firmilian* in most journals were quick to see the satire, particularly directed against "Gilfillan with his cognate style of criticism, and ill-judged laudation of every erring son of the Muses."²⁵ Aytoun wittily but none the less cruelly destroyed Gilfillan who, as a critic, was as dead as Haverillo. None took his criticism seriously after 1854. The effects on Dobell were even more disastrous. His poetic

career was over. Thus, effectively squelched, Dobell's influence and the Spasmodic impulse went underground only to reemerge as self-conscious decadence in figures like Swinburne and Wilde.

Dobell wrote two other volumes of poetry after *Balder: Sonnets on the War* with Alexander Smith and *England in time of War*, but both met with critical dismissal. He has since been classed among the "basement dwellers of literature."²⁶ Perhaps his chief merit in literary history was his articulation of a poetic theory that might well serve as a transition point between the Romantic and Victorian periods—even of the Victorians and the Moderns. For his poetry embodies characteristics of the three ages—the subjective, passionate, liberty-loving Romantic who glorifies the ordinary until it becomes extraordinary, the alienated, yet prosperous Victorian who glorifies the triumphs of empire while becoming increasingly fearful of the ghostly demons within, and the complicated, despairing modern who discovers the failure of reason and of patriarchy. Dobell was a seminal poet who took his craft seriously and provided some striking innovations in his layering of meanings onto the associative metaphor. He had his faults of effusiveness and discursiveness, to be sure, but he was given no recuperative space in which to tame his over-exuberant fancy, his voluptuous imagery, his diffuse obscurity. Extreme, even cruel, criticism broke his spirit. He died in 1874, aged fifty-two years. He never finished his *Balder*.

NOTES

1. Dobell appears as footnote 12 in *A Literary History of England*, Albert C. Baugh, ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948) 1387. For the title of this paper I am indebted to Robert Birley's *Sunk without Trace: Some Forgotten Masterpieces Reconsidered* (London: Rupert Hart Davis, 1962).
2. Robert Preyer, who has the distinction of being the first to give Dobell's theory of poetry a scholarly analysis, judged it "an impressive and significant document for the literary historian and theorist" and a work which should have "considerable interest for anyone who concerns himself with the cultural history of the period." See "Sydney Dobell and the Victorian Epic," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 30 (Jan. 1961): 163-78. Isobel Armstrong in her study, "The Role and the Treatment of Emotion in Victorian Criticism of Poetry," (*Victorian Periodicals Newsletter* 10 [1977]: 3-16), judged Dobell's theory as "one of the most sophisticated accounts of metaphor" she had read.
3. Henry Taylor, *Autobiography* vol. 2 (London, 1874): 119.
4. ———. Preface to *Philip Van Artevelde: A Dramatic Romance* vol. 1 (London, 1834): xi.
5. Thomas Love Peacock, *Four Ages of Poetry*, ed. H. F. B. Brett-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1921) 18.
6. Isaac Taylor, *Natural History of Enthusiasm* (London, 1829) 2.
7. John Keble, *De Poetica Vi Medica Praelectiones Academicae* (London, 1844) 222-3; his criticism of Byron, 573, 687.

8. Edmund Gosse, "Philip James Bailey," *The Critic* Nov. 1902: 457.
9. Philip James Bailey, *Festus: A Poem* (London, 1839) 238.
10. For example, see the complaints about the paucity of good poetry in "Reviews," *Literature of 1841*, *St. James Magazine* Jan. 1842: 127.
11. The poem of 8103 lines in 1839 had grown to 12,795 lines in 1845, and was to grow to 39,159 lines in 1903. See Morse Peckham's, "English Editions of Philip James Bailey's *Festus*," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*: 55-58; also "American Editions of *Festus*: A Preliminary Survey," *Princeton Library Chronicle* June 1947: 177-84.
12. Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson, A Memoir* vol. 1 (London, 1897) 234.
13. Charles Tennyson, *Alfred Tennyson* (New York: MacMillan, 1949) 215.
14. This optimistic note was affirmed when Bailey, introducing the fiftieth anniversary edition of *Festus*, affirmed that the poem was opposed "as far as possible to that of the partialist, pessimist, and despairing sceptic, the belief of the misbeliever, so prevalent in our time." Philip James Bailey, *Festus: A Poem*, Fiftieth Anniversary Edition (London, 1889) 1.
15. Emily Jolly, ed., *The Life and Works of Sydney Dobell* vol. 1 (London: 1878) 108. For Jolly's discussion of Dobell's precocity and religious background see I: 37, also Appendices A&B, 64-67.
16. "Isabel" (1847), "A Musing on Victory" (1847), Some of his early poems—"A Village Colloquy," "The Dying Girl to Her Mother," "The Massacre at Glencoe," "The French People to Armand Carrell,"—appeared in *The People's Journal* during 1847 and 1848; however, his poetry was appreciated by few beyond the confines of his own family, church friends, and the readership of *The People's Journal*. Jerome Thale discovered that the poems Jolly claimed had been published in *Chamber's Journal* had really been published in *The People's Journal*: 4 (1847): 122; 5 (1848): 151; 5 (1848): 54-56, 59-61; 5 (1848): 192-93 (Thale, 434-35). Jerome Thale, "Sydney Dobell: A Spasmodic Poet," diss. Northwestern U., 1954.
17. George Gilfillan, rev. of "The Roman," *Eclectic Review* 27ns (1850): 672-84.
18. W. Robertson Nicoll ed., *A Gallery of Literary Portraits* (London & New York: Dent, Dutton, 1909) vii.
19. "In Memoriam—The Reverend George Gilfillan," *The Dundee Advertiser* (August 1878): 10.
20. John Nichol, ed., *The Poetical Works of Sydney Dobell* vol. 2 (London: Smith Elder, 1875) 9-10. Dobell did not number his lines, nor did Nichol. All subsequent citations are from Nichol's edition and numbers refer to pages.
21. Rev. Donald MacLeod, ed. "In Memoriam—Sydney Dobell" *Good Words for 1874* (London, 1874) 718.
22. William Aytoun, "Firmilian: A Tragedy," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* May 1854: 533-555. This essay is cited as "Firmilian."
23. ———. *Firmilian or the student of Badajoz: A Spasmodic Tragedy* (Edinburgh and London: 1854).
24. Aytoun describes Apollodorus (Gilfillan) in raptures over the young, "undiscovered" poet, Sancho, who sings:
 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!
25. Rev. of "Firmilian" *Westminster Review*: Oct. 1854: 615.
26. Virginia Woolf, *The Second Common Reader* (London: Faber, 1942) 126.