

Rhythmic Intimacy, Spasmodic Epistemology

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AMONG THE MANY REASONS CRITICS IN THE 1850s CONDEMNED WHAT WAS called the Spasmodic style, none appears to have perplexed and frustrated readers so much as the poets' seemingly irregular use of rhythm. In response to Sydney Dobell's 1856 volume *England in Time of War*, a critic for the *Saturday Review* complains that the poet "neither sees, feels, nor thinks like ordinary men. . . . Before we are half through the book, we begin to distrust the evidence of our senses."¹ A writer for the *National Review* similarly critiques the apparent disorder of Dobell's poetry: "His thoughts and fancies flow like the sounds from an instrument of music, struck by the hand of a child,—a jumble of sweet and disconnected notes, without order or harmony."² But Dobell and his Spasmodic compatriots were not alone in challenging the senses of their readers, and literary critics in the 1850s show increasing indignation and anxiety that any poet should "rel[y] on the sympathy of the interpreter" to intuit a poem's intended rhythmic design.³ Writing of Robert Browning's *Men and Women*, a reviewer in the *Athenaeum* protests that recent poets

have expected [the reader] here to lean on a cadence,—there to lend accent to the rhyme, or motion to the languid phrase; in another place, to condense a multitude of syllables, so as to give an effect of concrete strength. . . . Our poets now speak in an unknown tongue,—wear whatever unpoetic garniture it pleases their conceit or their idleness to snatch up; and the end too often is, pain to those who love them best, and who most appreciate their high gifts and real nobleness,—and to the vast world, whom they might assist, they bring only a mystery and receive nothing but wonder and scorn. (Chorley, p. 1327)

Though concerned with more than formal irregularity, the reviewer identifies his contemporaries' rhythmic waywardness as part and parcel of their poems' "unpoetic garniture," their difficult language, and, here in the case of Browning, the shocking images and figurative language. Many critics simply did not know how to read rhythmically irregular poetry, and they

did not trust, or did not want to trust, to their intuition.⁴

The criticism perhaps would not have been as vehement had not Victorian readers associated the Spasmodics' unruly formal styles with Britain's own fragmented and increasingly heterogeneous culture. When a writer for *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, an American journal, called Alexander Smith "a child of the time," the point was clear enough.⁵ As other contributors to this special issue demonstrate, the Spasmodic poets were linked by their critics to cultural crises in gender and sexuality (Blair, Hughes), class and national identity (Tucker, Harrison, Boos), and religious practice (Mason, LaPorte). Perhaps most threatening were not the particular cultural values Spasmodic poetry seemed to defy, but the formal methods poets such as Smith and Dobell used to propagate these challenges to British readers. According to Sydney Dobell, the most sophisticated theorist of Spasmodic poetics, the self-conscious work of poetic interpretation matters little next to the unselfconscious effects of rhythm on the physical bodies of readers. As we shall see, Dobell's poetic theory holds that poetry transmits knowledge and feeling primarily through rhythm, rather than through words or other formal structures. Rhythm for Dobell expresses metonymically the physiological conditions of the human body—its pulses either harmonize with or strain against the throbbing of our physical beings—and poets communicate most readily through a reader's sympathetic and unmediated experience of these stressed and unstressed rhythmic impulses.⁶ Physiologically felt rhythm creates an intimacy between poet and reader such that the reader shares in the physical, and sometimes even mental, experiences of the poet. Hence if Spasmodic poetry threatens Victorian cultural values by unseating conventional notions of gender, sexuality, class, nationality, and religion, Spasmodic poetics—and especially Dobell's notion of rhythm—threatens Victorian culture by promulgating these unconventional values, by offering a vehicle for the widespread dispersal of the eccentric. Indeed, for William Edmondstone Aytoun, a firm Tory and the most vocal critic of the Spasmodic poets, metrical regularity enforces cultural stability as much as rhythmic spasms encourage much that is "wrong" with the times (which for Aytoun included new reform measures and the granting of rights to women).⁷

Dobell was well aware of this sort of critique, and in many ways his theory of poetry solicits such a response. Whereas Edmund Gosse would later dismiss Spasmodic poetry as "blustering blank verse," Dobell values bluster insofar as it enables poets to impress themselves more firmly upon readers' bodies and to forge intimate, affective links between poets and readers.⁸ "Depend on it," Dobell writes to an aspiring poet, "whatever is to live on paper, must have lived in flesh and blood."⁹ Physiological spasms reflect a "truth" of feeling, which the poet then publicizes for others to

experience: "I have lived what I have sung," proclaims the poet Balder, "And it shall live."¹⁰ In a profoundly democratizing gesture, poetry in the Spasmodic model seems no longer limited to an elite few, but directed instead to the human body and universal experiences. Looking beyond the threats to cultural stability that Aytoun would soon make synonymous with Spasmody, Arthur Hugh Clough in 1853 praised the "real flesh-and-blood heart and soul" of Spasmodic poetry insofar as it might speak to more than just those with "refined . . . and highly educated sensibilities." Whereas Matthew Arnold's poetry seems perhaps "too delicate . . . for common service," Smith's *A Life-Drama* radiates outward with language and feelings intelligible to all its readers.¹¹ George Henry Lewes writes with similar enthusiasm in an 1853 *Westminster Review* essay on Alexander Smith, declaring that the young poet's "eager senses have embraced the world" with "sensuousness of imagery, and directness of fervid expression."¹²

In what follows, I will focus on the work of Sydney Dobell to examine how such a universalized notion of feeling—a physiologically experienced feeling that embraces "the world"—translates into a poetic theory. We will look first to Dobell's poetic theories, then to the passionate rhythms of *Balder*, and finally to Dobell's last volume of poems, *England in Time of War* (1856). Of particular interest will be Dobell's development of poetic theory in response to contemporary advances in the physiological sciences, as well as hypotheses of social structure emerging at the time from theorists such as Comte, Herbert Spencer, and Lewes, all of whom looked regularly to physiology to substantiate their various theoretical claims. Far from being engaged in an isolated and anomalous endeavor, the Spasmodic poets in fact operated very much within the mainstream of mid-Victorian philosophy and social science. Dobell, in other words, had his finger on the pulse of Victorian thought in experimenting with what I will be calling rhythmic epistemology, the communication of knowledge and feeling through physiological pulses. And the initial popularity of his work indicates that, while controversial, his poetry struck a nerve in readers of the mid-Victorian period.

But first we would do well to interrogate more fully the term Victorian critics used to isolate Dobell's poetic theory and to disparage its practice. The word "spasmodic" never had an especially positive connotation. The British witnessed in the 1830s an epidemic known as "Spasmodic Cholera"; the disease was to strike again in 1853-54, the period of the Spasmodic literary crisis, killing 26,000.¹³ In 1847 Jane Eyre feels Rochester's "spasmodic movement of fury or despair" when Richard Mason interrupts their marriage ceremony.¹⁴ And Elizabeth Gaskell describes Ruth's "spasmodic effort" to tell the painful story of her son's illegitimate origins: "She at length, holding him away from her, and nerving herself up to tell him all

by one spasmodic effort."¹⁵ In her contribution to this volume, Kirstie Blair traces the use of the word through nineteenth-century medical discourse, showing its association with weakness and effeminacy. The OED defines "spasmodic" in terms roughly equivalent to those W. E. Aytoun used to characterize the Spasmodic poets: "Agitated, excited; emotional, high-strung; given to outbursts of excitement; characterized by a disjointed or unequal style of expression." But the OED's definition of "spasm" gets more to the uncontrollable nature to which the word refers, as it is used by Brontë and Gaskell: "Any sudden or convulsive movement of a violent character; a convulsion." This is also the sense of "spasmodic" as it is used by Darwin in *The Descent of Man* (1871):

Animals of all kinds which habitually use their voices utter various noises under any strong emotion, as when enraged and preparing to fight; but this may merely be the result of nervous excitement, which leads to the spasmodic contraction of almost all the muscles of the body, as when a man grinds his teeth and clenches his hands in rage or agony.¹⁶

When in 1854 W. E. Aytoun launched his attack on what he called, borrowing the term from Charles Kingsley, the "Spasmodic" school, he might have been surprised to know how accurately the term reflected Dobell's own theory of poetry. To Dobell, poetry necessarily originates in spasmodic—that is to say, uncontrollable and unpremeditated—vibrations of the human body. Dobell suggests as much in an 1857 lecture on the "Nature of Poetry" that he gave in Edinburgh, wherein he argues that poetry "is actually in tune with our material flesh and blood," that it relies on "certain modes of verbal *motion*, . . . certain *rhythms* and measures [that] are metaphors of ideas and feelings."¹⁷ The most extreme examples of Spasmodic poetry seem to have been written with Dobell's theory in mind, as though conscious, formal analysis were to be cast aside in favor of one's own bodily response to poetry. It is in one's "material flesh and blood" that the reader will properly understand the Spasmodic poem, as the brain intuitively converts rhythmic impulses into knowledge, "ideas and feelings." It is through the spasmodic reaction of the human body to rhythm that the poetry will "live."

As I have already suggested, Dobell's understanding of rhythm develops in part from contemporary advances in the physiological sciences. In *The Senses and the Intellect* (1855), perhaps the most notable among the many physiological studies published in the decade, Alexander Bain argues for the dependence of thought on the physical experiences of the body. Bain, very much a part of the intellectual circle that included G. H.

Lewes and Herbert Spencer, was among the first to insist that thought itself results from physical “currents” moving through the brain, a radical departure from the alternate theory of the time which envisioned the brain as “a *sanctum sanctorum*, or inner chamber, where impressions are poured in and stored up.”¹⁸ In Bain’s model, the human body becomes a living organism that derives knowledge through subjective, physiological experience, rather than an objective container into which knowledge from the surrounding world is “stored.” Over several hundred pages, Bain catalogues each of the five senses, and the processes by which encounters with the physical world inspire nerve transmissions, which transmissions ultimately constitute “the very essence of cerebral action” (p. 62). Our knowledge of the world, in other words, comes from the brain’s interpretation of nerve impulses, a transformation of physical rhythmic patterns into conscious thought. Bain compares the nervous system to the newly developed technology of the electric telegraph:

The function of a nerve is to transmit impressions, influences, or stimuli, from one part of the system to another. . . . Hence the term “conductor” applies to the lines of nerve passing to and fro throughout the body. These are in their essential function telegraph wires; for although the force conveyed by a nerve differs from the force conveyed by a telegraphic wire, there is an absolute sameness in this, that the influence is generated at one spot and transmitted to another through an intermediate substance, which substance acts the carrier part solely. (p. 38)

Like a telegraph clerk who comes to understand a message through the experience of long and short electrical impulses, or Morse code, the human brain encounters and comes to understand the surrounding world through the rhythmic impress of sensation on the physical body. Sound waves, for example, “enter the passage of the outer ear, and strike the membrane of the tympanum” (p. 199). The auditory nerve then “propagate[s] to the brain a different form of excitement according as the *beats* [received on the tympanum] are few or many,” and according to “extremely minute differences of pitch [that] *impress themselves* discriminatively on the fibres” (p. 206; italics mine). The brain at last interprets these rhythmic variations and determines the nature of the sound. While not entirely a new concept—David Hartley had elaborated on “the vibrations which belong to ideas” as early as 1749—Bain yet establishes for his Victorian audience an epistemology of rhythm, a comprehensive physiology of the human body that locates in rhythmic experience the origin of all knowledge.¹⁹

Spasmodic poetics emerges out of such an insistently physical under-

standing of the human body and its experience of the world, an understanding located not only in Bain's study, but in a wide-ranging mid-Victorian discourse on physiology.²⁰ In this discourse, Spasmodic poets find justification for understanding rhythm—and the human body's physical experience of rhythm—as a foundation for thought: rhythmically inflected sound waves strike the ear, causing vibrations, which the brain converts to forms of knowledge, much as workers at the telegraph convert electric impulses into intelligible language. Sydney Dobell makes these connections explicit in his 1857 lecture, in which he describes poetic rhythm as “vibrations . . . propagated through matter” and concludes that we must expect “a *general* submission” of the human body to these physical principles of sound (*Thoughts*, pp. 23, 24). Dobell makes clear the origins of his rhythmic epistemology in referencing Sir Charles Wheatstone, co-inventor of the electric telegraph in Britain. Along with the German scientist Ernst Chladni and the French-born Felix Savart (both of whom conducted important experiments with sound waves in the early nineteenth century), Wheatstone, Bain writes, had “shown to what a wonderful extent vibrations . . . when once set in motion are repeated by sympathetic and other action in innumerable reflexes, each bearing computable relations to the original impulse” (*Thoughts*, p. 24). Dobell connects Wheatstone's model for rhythmic communication with the work of Bain and other physiological scientists, describing the successive stages of an individual's sensory encounter with the world. In Bain's model, information progresses from the physiological experience of the body to the processes of the mind. So too, argues Dobell, poetry moves through paths of “*rhythmic succession*,” such that the body experiences the “lower data” of poetic rhythm as a physical force, which is converted by the brain into “higher data,” thoughts and ideas. The brain, in other words, converts the physical experience of rhythm into an intellectual construction of the poem and its meaning. In a powerfully assertive gesture of secularization, Dobell describes this process as “the word of Man made flesh and dwelling amongst us” (*Thoughts*, pp. 25, 26). Thus, like the telegraph, which seems through patterns of electric impulses to cancel the effects of physical distance among individuals, poetic rhythm conveys across time and space the physical impress of a speaking poet on a community of readers. Poetry comes to “dwell” intimately in the bodies of its readers, individuals who vibrate to the rhythm of stressed and unstressed syllables and who come to forms of knowledge through their rhythmic experiences.

With mixed results, Dobell explores the communicative potential of poetry with physiologically inspired rhythms. Here is an “evensong” from *Balder*, sung during one of the poem's few lighthearted moments, an idyllic interlude that interrupts what is otherwise an oppressive investigation into

metaphysics and aesthetics (topics to which we shall turn momentarily). Balder sings, accompanying himself on a harp:

The mavis sings upon the old oak tree
 Sweet and strong,
 Strong and sweet,
 Soft, sweet, and strong,
 And with his voice interpreteth the silence
 Of the dim vale when Philomel is mute!
 The dew lies like a light upon the grass,
 The cloud is as a swan upon the sky,
 The mist is as a brideweed on the moon.
 The shadows new and sweet
 Like maids unwonted in the dues of joy
 Play with the meadow flowers,
 And give with fearful fancies more and less,
 And come, and go, and flit
 A brief emotion in the moving air,
 And now are stirred to flight, and now are kind,
 Unset, uncertain, as the cheek of Love. (*Balder* XXIII, pp. 123-124)

Dobell's rhythm consistently surprises as it leaps among pentameter, dimeter, and trimeter lines. Echoing Tennyson's "Short swallow-flights of song, that dip / Their wings in tears, and skim away," Balder's song is meant to "come, and go, and flit / A brief emotion in the moving air."²¹ But unlike Tennyson's balanced tetrameter measures, Dobell's poem refuses a regular meter, and in fact seems to rely for its effects precisely on its irregularity. A Pindaric ode, perhaps, Balder's song may more appropriately be considered in light of Tennyson's nearly contemporaneous "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington" (1852), which similarly abstains from strict metrical regularity. Like Dobell's *Balder*, Tennyson's Wellington ode was attacked by some as "disdaining all rules of rhythm and metre": "an intrinsically poor performance."²² But as Dobell instructs us in his lecture, we are not meant to think consciously about such poems' formal designs, but rather to "submit[t]" to the spasms of the rhythmic "vibrations" and trust that some form of knowledge will come as a result.

We can intuit from Dobell's unpublished writings some of the poet's justification for believing so forcefully in rhythm. In an entry on the "Origin of Rhythm, Sleep, &c.," Dobell emphasizes the centrality of rhythmic experience to human life. Life, writes Dobell, "is a systole and diastole"; be it waking and sleeping, inhaling and exhaling, or any number of other reflexive actions, rhythmic patterns govern the human body (*Thoughts*, p. 128). Dobell hypothesizes that our sense of rhythm, art, and even language

originates in our bodies through the various processes of “systole and diastole,” through patterned experience, in part because these processes are common to all human beings. Like Bain, whose physiological study implicitly argues for a fundamental universality in human experience (Bain suggests for example that a pattern of “waxing and waning” sound “wakens up [in listening individuals] an intense current of emotion; in general, I believe, of a very solemnising kind” [p. 207]), Dobell believes that all individuals respond in a like manner to patterned phenomena. Bain, we know, takes his inspiration for such thinking from the *System of Logic* (1840) of his friend John Stuart Mill, which surmises that the “thoughts, feelings, and actions of human beings” might eventually be understood within a system of “general laws” from which “predictions [with respect to behavior and emotional response] may be founded”; Mill, that is, believes that scientists might in due time forecast—“though often not with complete accuracy”—the processes of human thought, feeling, and action.²³ If such predictions might be made by the scientist of human nature—or, to use Comte’s neologism, by the sociologist—then the poet, in Dobell’s view, might accurately predict how readers will respond to rhythmic patterns. Dobell writes in another unpublished essay, “Notes on the Relation of Language and Thought,” that the poet uses sound to recreate “sense”

by producing the same state of mind as the thing represented would produce—and this is done in various ways—by sounds that have essential connection with certain attitudes of mind, or by sounds that, by *suggesting certain acts of the organs of utterance*, influence the feelings, or by *rhythm* that, through various laws, affects the whole human system. (*Thoughts*, p. 138)

The poet, then, is something of a scientist of human nature, crafting verses to elicit through physiological association patterns of universal thought and feeling. We as readers can only intuit the intended effect of Balder’s evensong as we read the poem, experience its various rhythmic cadences, and note our unselfconscious passionate responses.

Curiously enough, however, the chief point of *Balder* seems not to experiment with rhythmic variation and physiological association, but rather to suggest the potential dangers of such poetic handiwork. And though large passages of the poem engage with rhythmic experimentation, it must be said that most of *Balder* progresses as lines of regular iambic pentameter. Rather than indulging uncritically in rhythmic hedonism, then, Dobell’s poem speculates primarily on the hazards of rhythm understood as a physiological effect. Says Balder, meditating on a poem he hopes to compose,

This hot breast
 Seems valley deep, and what the wind of Fate
 Strikes on that harp strung there to bursting, I,
 Descending, mean to catch as one unmoved
 In stern notation. (XVII, p. 70)

Balder here imagines himself an aeolian harp set to vibrate and transmit song originating in his own “hot breast.” Balder means to capture his own passionate vibrations and to convert them into “stern notation,” language and rhythm, so that he might broadcast them telegraphically to the world at large. He later develops this notion, referring to himself as the “Bard of the future! Master-Prophet! Man / Of Men, at whose strong girdle hang the keys / Of all things!” (XXIV, p. 161). Such exaggerated Carlylean aspirations turn gruesome when one learns that Balder gives his speech immediately after having murdered his own daughter, whom he kills specifically so that in “los[ing] / What nothing can restore” (XVI, p. 66) he might be more intensely moved to feeling, and hence to compose poetry more intensely resonant with passion:

I rise up childless, but no less
 Than I. There was one bolt in all the heavens
 Which falling on my head had with a touch
 Rent me in twain. This bursting water-spout
 Hath left me whole, but naked. (XVI, p. 69)

Dobell was sympathetic to Balder’s ideal of the poet as a telegraph-like aeolian harp. But his connection of this ideal to infanticide indicates no small degree of uncertainty in the telegraphic process.²⁴ *Balder* quickly degenerates into farce if one takes seriously, for example, the electric “bolt” meant to set the poet’s composition flowing like a “bursting water-spout” (a parody, no doubt, of Wordsworthian spontaneous overflow). It is thus in the extremes of Balder’s aspirations that we can read most clearly Dobell’s critique of his own theory of poetry. Balder is self-absorbed, self-pitying, and immoral, and “Balderism,” writes Dobell in a defensive preface to the poem’s second edition, “is a predominant intellectual misfortune of our day.”²⁵

Perhaps Balder does not represent the necessary result of rhythmic spasms, but his actions suggest at least one appalling misuse of Dobell’s poetic theory. The challenge, it would seem, is to communicate spasmodic rhythm without degenerating into self-absorption and morbidity (terms Victorian critics commonly used to describe Dobell’s poem). *Balder* returns consistently to this problem in an anxious inquiry into the physical nature of thought and feeling. Balder speaks for both Dobell and his age when remarking that

our heart-strings over-strung
 Scare us with strange *involuntary* notes
 Quivering and quaking. (XIV, p. 61; italics mine)

Or again, in a revelry at once ecstatic and anxiety-ridden,

I know the wind!
 The utter world doth touch me! I can grasp
 The hands that stretch forth from the mystery
 That passeth! I am crowded with my life!
 It is too much! the vital march doth stop
 To press about me! (XXIV, p. 134)

And near the end of the poem, as Balder considers murdering his wife (whose grief for her murdered daughter and escalating madness distract Balder from his composition), he laments,

The dark excess
 That for so many days o'er-loaded all
 My swollen veins, strangled each vital service,
 And pressing hard the incommoded soul
 In its unyielding tenement *convulsed*
 The wholesome work of nature (XXXIX, pp. 255-256; italics mine)

In each passage, Balder considers the dangers of sensory overload, the intense impress of sensation on his physical and psychological being. He is horrified at the “involuntary” nature of these impulses, feeling “crowded” by sensation that ultimately “convulse[s]” from out of him, an uncontrolled—that is to say, spasmodic—physiological excretion (a metaphor to which we shall return shortly). Physical and metaphysical collapse upon one another in Balder’s language, as the boundaries between mind and body, “swollen vein” and “incommoded soul,” seem less and less distinct. Balder’s whole being, an “unyielding tenement,” writhes to convulsions inspired by “dark excess,” grief and self-loathing. These convulsions are reflected in the haphazard rhythms of his lines, themselves a seemingly Spasmodic overflow of powerful feeling—feeling clearly not recollected in tranquility, but convulsed from within onto the written page. Rhythm here becomes a metonymic extension of the writing poet at the moment of his tortured composition.

Balder offers its readers little objective distance from its passionate subjectivity. As in dramatic monologues such as “Porphyria’s Lover” (1836), we intuit a critical attitude toward the poem’s speaker only through the speaker’s own excesses.²⁶ And yet there are, upon close examination, moments of critical self-reflection in *Balder*, moments when Balder himself

seems to consider the ill effects of his own poetic style. One of the most remarkable of these instances appears early in Balder's musings. He has been thinking in his study, as he is wont to do—indeed, almost the whole of the poem transpires in Balder's study—when a group of sailors pass by below his window, singing a “chant of Freedom” (IX, p. 46). The song inspires Balder to reflect on what he considers freedom's opposite, tyranny. “Lo Tyranny!” he begins, and then envisages the progress of tyranny personified, a figure of excrement making his way across the landscape:

thro' gurgling weight
 Of seething full corruption night and day
 His craving bowels, famished in his fill,
 Bellowed for more. Which, when the creature heard
 That bore him, dread, like a great shock of life,
 Convulsed it, and the myriad frantic hands,
 Sprang like the dances of a madman's dream.
 And so he came; and o'er his head a sweat
 Hung like a sulphurous vapour, and beneath
 Fetid and thunderous as from belching hell,
 The hot and hideous torrent of his dung
 Roared down explosive, and the earth, befouled
 And blackened by the stercorous pestilence,
 Wasted below him, and where'er he passed
 The people stank. (IX, pp. 47-48)

Balder's idea of a tyranny that spews its infectious waste upon all those it passes seems in many ways a self-reflexive critique of his own Spasmodic style. Dobell—and Balder himself, it seems—would have agreed with W. E. Aytoun's comparison of his poem to “a beer-bottle voiding its cork, and spontaneously ejecting its contents right and left.”²⁷ Dobell's self-reflexivity seems especially apparent given the preceding sailors' song on Freedom, a tale of naval victory told in a fairly regular metrical style:

“See yon ugly craft
 With the pennon at her main!
 Hurrah, my merry boys,
 There goes the Betsy Jane!” (IX, p. 45)

Freedom, associated here with the bravery of the British navy, is also a simple, ballad-like narrative, a tale sung without internal reflection or metaphysical anxiety. Thus the “hot and hideous torrent” of tyranny's progress strikes an image “contrary” (IX, p. 46) to freedom's song both thematically and formally. Tyranny as Balder imagines it convulses in a violently abject projection of rhythmic impulses, whereas freedom performs

a rhythmically predictable chorus, a key perhaps to reading *Balder* as a critique of its own Spasmodic style. Dobell's point is not of course that Spasmodic rhythm necessarily resembles a "torrent of . . . dung," but rather that the possibility always exists, that the "corruption" of Spasmodic excess (which, ironically, so much of *Balder* exemplifies) must be carefully avoided.

In direct contrast to tyranny's corrupting torrent, Dobell in a posthumously published essay on "Beauty, Love, Order, Unity" emphasizes the value of "the *harmony* of rhythmic parts" (*Thoughts*, p. 113). "Love," Dobell suggests, is a "passion toward unity," an effort to attain rhythmic harmony. Tyranny, on the other hand, might be construed as a passion toward disunity, the making of perpetual chaos. In *Balder*, then, freedom expresses itself with rhythmic predictability, as that which has already achieved formal harmony, whereas tyranny is a cacophony of sound. Dobell had meant *Balder* (subtitled "Part the First") to be a three-part progress "from Doubt to Faith, from Chaos to Order" (*Works*, 2:3-4), but for reasons unknown, though probably connected with the critical sacking of the first part, Dobell never wrote the second two volumes of his poem. Within the overarching project of *Balder*, then, the second and third parts would have realized the order and unity that come of the poet's intense struggles. *Balder's* spasmodic bellowing would eventually have indicated his personal struggle against tyranny and toward freedom. The negative possibilities in physiological rhythm would have been overcome, and the poet would have revelled in Spasmodic impulses freed from the tyranny of introspection and morbidity.

This of course never happens in *Balder*, but it is I believe one way of reading the trajectory of Dobell's post-*Balder* publications. Dobell published only two volumes of poetry after *Balder*. The first, *Sonnets on the War* (1855), was a collaboration with fellow Spasmodic poet Alexander Smith; the second, *England in Time of War* (1856), features Dobell's personal response to the Crimean struggle. The poems in the second volume indicate more clearly than his earlier efforts Dobell's program for embodying passionate thought and feeling in rhythmic impulses. The poems take the perspective of various individuals touched by the war: a woman awaiting the return of her son; an estranged lover; a sailor returning from battle. Periods of metrical regularity alternate with highly irregular passages that enlist repetition, assonance, and rhythmic stresses to produce in the reader a somatic response resonant with the scene described. In this, his final published volume of poetry, we see Dobell at last employing rhythm as a decisive vehicle for expression. For example, "An Evening Dream" recalls a British charge into battle:

Clarion and clarion defying,
 Sounding, resounding, replying,
 Trumpets braying, pipers playing, chargers neighing,
 Near and far
 The to and fro storm of the never-done hurraing,
 Thro' the bright weather banner and feather rising and falling, bugle
 and fife
 Calling, recalling—for death or for life—
 Our host moved on to the war,
 While England, England, England, England, England!
 Was blown from line to line near and far,
 And like the morning sea, our bayonets you might see,
 Come beaming, gleaming, streaming,
 Streaming, gleaming, beaming,
 Beaming, gleaming, streaming, to the war. (*Works*, 1:323)

The passage alternates in speed, from the light-footed “Trumpets braying, pipers playing, chargers neighing,” to the ponderous repetitions of “England,” which seem ultimately not indicative of patriotism but rather only a line of pressing trochees, a leaning in and a retreating “to and fro.” We are, indeed, like the lines of British soldiers, “blown . . . near and far” by the poem’s rhythmic cadences. We also find ourselves in the midst of a confusing *melée* of sounds, words difficult to distinguish from one another both in meaning and sound: “Streaming, gleaming, beaming.” We feel, through the rhythm and the sound of the words, something physically and conceptually of the rushed confusion of a battle charge, “line to line” (and these words make explicit the congruence between the lines of soldiers and lines of Dobell’s poem). The affective experience here comes remarkably not through the literal definitions of the words themselves, but rather through the impress of rhythm and sound on the reader of the poem. These are the “certain modes of verbal *motion*” that Dobell advocates in his 1857 lecture, “certain *rhythms* and measures [that] are metaphors of ideas and feelings.”

It is not necessary to call this great poetry to see the daring of its experimentation. Dobell’s goal, essentially, is to capture in language the chaotic motions of the human mind, and thus to transmit to his readers the actual, felt experience he describes. To do this requires getting beyond words to the inner ideas and feelings words are meant to conjure.²⁸ “We are all irretrievably word-struck,” he writes sometime around 1850 (*LL*, 1:161):

We are too apt to confound words with language. Are not visible images or the ideas of them the only language in the highest sense?

Words are the outward noises by which we recall the inward shape.
 . . . To reason by ideas, to compare ideas with ideas, to speak from
 the first-hand idea, to call up in the hearer a picture, not a sen-
 tence, should be our great aim. (*LL* 1:155, 162)

Dobell says much the same in his 1857 lecture: “Words rhythmically com-
 bined affect the feelings of the poetic hearer or utterer in the same way as
 the fact they represent: and thus by a reflex action the fact is reproduced in
 the imagination” (*Thoughts*, pp. 36-37). This is the governing project of
 “An Evening Dream,” in which rhythmic impulses ultimately supersede
 the poem’s words. Dobell maximizes the rhythmic effects of the conclud-
 ing battle charge, quoted above, by opening the poem with fairly regulated
 fourteeners couplets:

I’m leaning where you loved to lean in eventides of old,
 The sun has sunk an hour ago behind the treeless wold,
 In this old oriel that we loved how oft I sit forlorn,
 Gazing, gazing, up the vale of green and waving corn. (*Works*, 1:315)

Dobell’s image of physical “leaning” underscores the physiological press of
 rhythm, the measured lines that gradually break apart and become increas-
 ingly irregular as the speaker’s dream moves from “the treeless wold” to a
 scene of invasion by the Russian army. It is precisely at the point of the
 invasion, a “flood that swelled from some embowelled mount of woe” that
 Dobell most clearly breaks from metrical regularity (and note again in
 “emboweled” the excremental trope, which Dobell consistently links to
 rhythmic spasm):

Waveless, foamless, sure and slow,
 Silent o’er the vale below,
 Till nigher still and nigher comes the seeth [*sic*] of fields on fire,
 And the thrash of falling tress, and the steam of rivers dry,
 And before the burning flood the wild things of the wood
 Skulk and scream, and fight, and fall, and flee, and fly. (p. 318)

The confusion climaxes in the British charge, the “to and fro storm . . .
 blown from line to line,” during which the metrical structure modulates
 freely, in the style of an ode, to maximize the physiological impact of rhyth-
 mic play.

One might highlight the effect of Dobell’s dissolution of rhythmic
 consistency by reading “An Evening Dream” alongside Tennyson’s nearly
 contemporaneous “Charge of the Light Brigade” (first published Decem-
 ber 9, 1854). Even Charles Kingsley, generally a great admirer of the poet
 laureate, suggests that “the dactyl is surely too smooth and cheerful a foot

to form the basis of such a lyric."²⁹ But perhaps what makes the poem appear disturbingly "smooth and cheerful" is not so much Tennyson's use of dactyls, but rather the unwavering consistency of the rhythm. More than most poets, Dobell understood the psychological and physiological effects of rhythmic inconsistency. In a letter of December 1855, Dobell writes that

anyone who would wholly understand any of my poetry . . . must read it with the mind of a musician. I don't mean that it is *musical*, in the common sense, but that it is written on the principles of music, *i.e.* as a series of combinations that shall produce certain *states* in the hearer, and not a succession of words which he is separately to "intellectuate" by the dictionary. (*LL*, 1:447).

Certainly "An Evening Dream" makes the most of this "musical" understanding of poetry, a movement away from words ordered metrically and toward an enactment of rhythmic epistemology, or physiological states of embodied, rhythmic passion. Dobell's poetry attempts to offer not intellectual reflection but unselfconscious, passionate experience.

Many of Dobell's contemporaries shared the poet's interest in physiology and the unselfconscious work of rhythm on the human body. Herbert Spencer's 1857 essay on "The Origin and Function of Music," for example, argues—like Dobell's lecture on poetry from the very same year—that "there is a direct connection between feeling and motion."³⁰ This connection, Spencer claims, is both "innate" and inexplicable: "Why the actions excited by strong feeling should tend to become rhythmical, is not very obvious; but that they do so there are divers evidences" (pp. 220, 223). If unsure of why rhythm and feeling reflect one another, Spencer is quite clear on the implications of this connection. Along with tonal modulations of voice (and the essay, I should emphasize, is primarily on the effects of music and not specifically poetry), rhythm enables other individuals "not only to *understand* the state of mind" that inspired a composition, "but to *partake* of that state" (p. 235). Such participation, writes Spencer, is "the chief med[ium] of *sympathy*" (p. 236), the glue to hold together an increasingly complex and atomized social structure.³¹

Spencer's essay helps to explain why his close friend George Henry Lewes found Alexander Smith so compelling as a poet: "His eager senses," Lewes had written in 1853, "have embraced the world." Lewes' only criticism for Smith is that he should "deepen and extend the nature of his passion, making it the flaming utterance of his *whole* being, sensuous, moral, and intellectual" ("Poems of Alexander Smith," p. 524). Such a fully corporeal and, simultaneously, intellectual project relies on the spasmodic imbrication of body and mind, rhythm and thought. In his later writings

on physiology, Lewes would propose that “all our knowledge *springs from*, and is *limited by*, Feeling.”³² For Lewes, any comprehension of objective nature comes necessarily through the individual human body; “subjective” bodily passions *lead to* “objective” knowledge, and each individual’s subjective experience of passionate sensation puts him in touch with, or at least opens the door to, objectivity. This necessarily subjective approach to objective knowledge is, for Lewes, the only way the world may be apprehended. Lewes values Smith because in his view the poet’s “embrace . . . [of] the world” demonstrates the potential for both a universal, objective synthesis of subjective knowledge and feeling and, through such a synthesis, the reinvigoration of sympathetic human relations.³³

George Eliot too had much to say about the consequences of feeling in poetic thought. Through her regular and anonymous contributions to the “Belles Lettres” section of the *Westminster Review*, Eliot was an active and little-acknowledged participant in the poetic debates emerging out of the Spasmodic controversy. Eliot by and large shared Lewes’ ideal of knowledge springing from feeling, and in an essay from January 1857, she criticizes the eighteenth-century poet Edward Young precisely for his “disruption of language from genuine thought and feeling.”³⁴ Later in the same issue of the *Westminster*, Eliot praises Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* for accomplishing what Young so miserably fails at, the perfect melding of “what we may call [her poem’s] poetical *body*” with “genuine thought and feeling”: in *Aurora Leigh* “there is simply a *full mind pouring itself out in song as its natural and easiest medium*.”³⁵ It should come as no surprise, given this praise for Barrett Browning, that Eliot could not help but be swayed in part by the work of the Spasmodic poets. She insists in a brief review of Dobell’s *England in Time of War* that she is “not [an] enthusiastic admirer . . . either of Mr. Dobell or of the school of poetry to which he belongs,” and yet she admits her appreciation for his occasional “passage[s] of simple pathos, [and] exquisite rhythmic melody laden with fresh and felicitous thought.”³⁶ Eliot here intuits (before Dobell had publicized his rhythmic theory) that rhythm and thought in the 1856 volume are to be understood as one and the same; it is Dobell’s rhythm, she writes, that bears his thought.

What these various reviews gesture at is how, within a particular school of thought, Dobell’s views on poetry must be seen as entirely commonplace. Dobell’s rhythmic epistemology does not spring *sui generis* out of the poet’s rabid imagination, but from an important body of mid-century scientific and philosophical thought. It is in part for its not being anomalous that Dobell’s Spasmodism seems dangerous to his critics (the mutterings of a madman might more easily have been dismissed). The forty years between Arthur Hallam’s 1831 review of Tennyson’s poetry of “sensation” and Robert Buchanan’s 1871 attack on Dante Rossetti and the “fleshly”

school witnessed a concentrated inquiry into the physiological nature of poetic experience. It is no coincidence that Dobell's poetry, and the Spasmodic movement more broadly considered, falls at the mid-point of this inquiry. Following in the empiricist tradition of Locke, Hartley, and Hume, Hallam argues that "sound conveys . . . meaning where words would not"; Buchanan opens his screed against Rossetti deploring those who "aver that poetic expression is greater than poetic thought."³⁷ Both critics here address essentially the same point, though from opposite argumentative positions; that is, reading poetry in the mid-Victorian period seems no longer an intellectual endeavor, but a full-bodied, spasmodic experience. Dobell's poetic theory, characterized most often (when characterized at all) as an abnormality, should be seen instead as the epicenter of a widespread literary movement entirely resonant with the mid-Victorian intellectual climate.

And yet it was a movement in which Dobell himself, as we have seen, lacked a certain degree of confidence. Dobell stresses that a poet can never know, really, the effect his rhythmic utterances will have on readers of his poem. He may only surmise, as Mill asserts in his *Logic*, "how the great *majority* of the human race, or of some nation or class of persons, will think, feel, and act" (*Works*, 8:847; italics mine). Insofar as poetry is a "carrying out and efflorescence of a human soul, according to *its own laws*" (*Thoughts*, p. 64), the poet can only hope that those personal laws will translate into universal ones. Thus if poetic rhythms resemble the long and short impulses of Morse code, they form a language only some will be able to read, and that perhaps many will misread and others entirely fail to read, as if readers of poetry were each to hold a unique code book for the incoming patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables. The critics had a point when they grumbled over having "here to lean on a cadence,—there to lend accent to the rhyme." *Balder* repeatedly calls attention to moments when rhythm necessarily fails to communicate, most notably in what has become a signal moment of Spasmodic excess, Balder's thirteen repetitions of "ah!" (*Balder* XXXVIII, p. 250). These lines scan equally well as iambs or trochees, anapests alternating with pyrrhics or solid runs of spondees; any attempt at scansion necessarily resorts to guesswork, and this seems to be Dobell's point precisely. Each reader will determine his or her own rhythmic pattern for the line, thereby rendering moot the possibility of it bearing a predetermined form of knowledge or feeling. At a certain point, then, the analogy between rhythm and the electric telegraph breaks down, as does the notion of interpersonal intimacy facilitated by poetic rhythm. Much as Dobell wants to align his rhythmic epistemology with the scientific work of Alexander Bain, Sir Charles Wheatstone, Ernst Chladni, and Felix Savart, the play of rhythm on individual human

bodies seems in the end too variable for consistent objective analysis.

And it was consistency, of course, that many of the critics writing against Spasmodic poetics most desired. Edmund Gosse, for example, writes in 1877 of the need to make “immortal art out of transient feeling,” and to accomplish this by “chisel[ing] material beauty out of passing thoughts and emotions.” Gosse assumes here, in language entirely familiar to readers of Dobell, that “transient feeling” might be captured in poetic form. But to do this, Gosse continues, requires “dismiss[ing]... purely spontaneous and untutored expression” such as that of the Spasmodics, and focusing instead on universally appreciated feelings and forms (Gosse, p. 53). In a similar vein, Coventry Patmore, whose 1857 *Essay on English Metrical Law* was in large part a response against Spasmodic poetics, writes that poetry “is truth or fact . . . expressed so as to affect the feelings.” For Patmore, it is precisely because poets access the realm of feeling that they must so carefully restrain themselves through form: “The free spirit of art, in its noblest developments,” he concludes, “has ever been obtained, not by neglect, but by perfection of discipline.”³⁸ These claims are not terribly distinct from Dobell’s own insistence that beauty is “the *harmony* of rhythmic *parts*” and that love is a “passion toward unity.” The question, as Dobell puts it in a letter to his future father-in-law, is not *whether* to restrain passionate experience, but “*what* is the proper restraint.” Though Dobell here is not writing specifically about poetry, his thoughts reflect the complex negotiations of rhythm and form later played out in his poetry: “I must express my perfect agreement with your assertion that the *proper* regulation of the passions is the mark of difference between a wise and a foolish man, or rather as I should more harshly term it, between a wicked and a righteous one” (*LL*, 1:39). Dobell clearly believes in regulating the physiological experience of rhythm, but only in extreme circumstances; even Balder must rage in order that he might (in the unwritten sequels to Dobell’s first volume) ultimately achieve “unity” and “harmony.” Patmore and Aytoun, on the other hand, could not abide such liberty; their aesthetic, cultural, and political views require the constant maintenance of strict form. And Dobell’s notion of restraint in art ultimately rejects any semblance of Patmore and Aytoun’s formalism: “All art that is the application of principles,” he writes in an essay on Charlotte Brontë, “smacks not of the artist, but the artisan.” Dobell praises Brontë for her “*Instinctive* art; for to the imaginative writer, all art that is not instinctive is dangerous” (*LL*, 1:173).

By 1877, Gosse believed Spasmodic poetics to have been rendered impotent. He writes of poets such as William Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti reinvigorating formal structures, returning technical dexterity to the fore of poetic composition:

The actual movement of the time, then, appears certainly to be in the direction of increased variety of richness of rhyme, elasticity of verse, and *strength of form*. The invertebrate rhapsodies of Sydney Dobell, so amazing in their beauty of detail and total absence of style, are now impossible. We may lack his inspiration and his insight, but we understand far better than he the workmanship of the art of verse. (Gosse, p. 55; italics mine)

To the contrary, however, the return to form that Gosse heralds carries with it unmistakable traces of Dobell's Spasmodic epistemology, the belief that rhythm—when properly composed—transmits knowledge and feeling with even more ease, in many cases, than words on a page. The stressed systems of Hopkins' poetry, for example, would be hard to imagine without the Spasmodic experiments of the 1850s, and the passionate variability of Whitman's rhythms—thought by Gosse and others to embody the Spasmodic sensibility—builds unmistakably on Dobell, Smith, and their compatriots (Whitman in fact was reading Smith's 1853 volume as he prepared the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* [1855]).³⁹ Poets such as Christina Rossetti, Swinburne, and innumerable others insist for the most part on formal regularity, and yet also admit to and cultivate a belief in the communicative power of rhythmic variability. Their poetry, like so much of the poetry composed in the post-Spasmodic years, negotiates anxiously between the formal regularity of Aytoun and Patmore and what the poet Mathilde Blind, following Dobell, considered the “primal and universal in the fate and feelings of man.”⁴⁰ Sydney Dobell's “invertebrate rhapsodies” echo persistently and with surprising strength through the late Victorian period, much as in the 1850s they helped determine the foremost poetic questions of the day.

Notes

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- 1 [Anonymous], review of *England in Time of War*, by Sydney Dobell, *Saturday Review* 2 (1856): 304.
- 2 [Anonymous], “Sydney Dobell's Poems on the War,” *National Review* 3 (1856): 442.
- 3 [Henry Fothergill Chorley], review of Robert Browning, *Men and Women*, *Athenæum* 1464 (November 17, 1855): 1327.

- 4 This is not always the case, of course. George Eliot, writing anonymously in the *Westminster Review*, finds in *Men and Women* “freshness, originality,” and the feeling that “what we took for obscurity in [Browning] was superficiality in ourselves” (“Belles Lettres,” *Westminster Review* 65 [January, 1856]: 290, 291). On Browning’s relation to the Spasmodics, see Antony H. Harrison, *Victorian Poets and Romantic Poems: Intertextuality and Ideology* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1990), pp. 44-68; and Mark A. Weinstein, *William Edmondstoune Aytoun and the Spasmodic Controversy* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 183-187.
- 5 [Anonymous], “The Poems of Alexander Smith,” *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine* 2 (July 1853): 99.
- 6 The argument retains its strength, as Derek Attridge recently suggests: “I don’t think it’s possible to discuss rhythm without relating it to the movements of the human body” (“Rhythm in English Poetry,” *NLH* 21 [Autumn 1990]: 1022). See also Richard Cureton, *Rhythmic Phrasing in English Verse* (New York: Longman, 1991).
- 7 See my discussion of Aytoun and the cultural work of poetic form in “On Cultural Neoformalism, Spasmodic Poetry, and the Victorian Ballad,” *VP* 41 (Winter 2003; special issue, ed. Linda K. Hughes, “Whither Victorian Poetry?”): 590-596. For Aytoun’s political arguments, see especially “The Reform Measures of 1852” (*Blackwood’s* 71 [March 1852]: 369-386), “The New Reform Bill” (*Blackwood’s* 75 [March 1854]: 369-380), and “The Rights of Women” (*Blackwood’s* 92 [August 1862]: 183-201).
- 8 Edmund Gosse, “A Plea for Certain Exotic Forms of Verse,” *Cornhill Magazine* 36 (1877): 54.
- 9 Quoted in E[mily] J[olly], ed., *The Life and Letters of Sydney Dobell*, 2 vols. (London, 1878), 1:292. Hereafter cited as *LL*.
- 10 Sydney Dobell, *Balder. Part the First* (London, 1854), Scene 3, p. 19. Hereafter cited by scene and page number.
- 11 [Arthur Hugh Clough], “Recent English Poetry” *North American Review* 77 (1853): 6, 12.
- 12 [George Henry Lewes], “Poems of Alexander Smith.” *Westminster Review* 59 (April 1853): 523-524; emphases mine.
- 13 A. N. Wilson, *The Victorians* (New York and London: Norton, 2003), p. 36. For a contemporary history of the disease, see Michael Durey, *The First Spasmodic Cholera Epidemic in York, 1832* (York: St. Anthony’s Press, 1974).
- 14 Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847; Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2000), p. 378.
- 15 Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth* (1853; New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 281.
- 16 Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871; Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981), 2:275.
- 17 Sydney Dobell, *Thoughts on Art, Philosophy and Religion* (London, 1876), pp. 22, 25.
- 18 Alexander Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect* (London, 1855), p. 61.
- 19 David Hartley, *Hartley’s Theory of the Human Mind* (London, 1775), p. 25.
- 20 Physiology figures prominently in several studies of Victorian fiction; poetry, though more central to mid-Victorian thinking on physiological experience, figures less

- frequently in recent literary accounts of the period. Some examples include Barbara Hardy, *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction* (London: Peter Owen, 1985); Peter Melville Logan, *Nerves and Narratives: A Cultural History of Hysteria in 19th-Century British Prose* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1997); Gesa Stedman, *Stemming the Torrent: Expression and Control in the Victorian Discourses on Emotions, 1830-1872* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2002); Janet Wood, *Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991).
- 21 Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, sec. 48, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, 3 vols., ed. Christopher Ricks (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987), 2:366.
 - 22 See Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., "The History of A Poem: Tennyson's *Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington*," *SB* 13 (1960): 155-156. My thanks to Herbert Tucker for pointing out the structural parallels between Dobell and Tennyson.
 - 23 John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1981), 8:846, 845. For the impact of Mill's science of human nature on Victorian thought, see Diana Postlethwaite's section on "Universal Causation" in *Making It Whole: A Victorian Circle and the Shape of Their World* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 25-39.
 - 24 In his contribution to this volume, Herbert Tucker argues that Balder may not, in fact, murder his daughter. Whatever the case, Dobell connects the idea of infanticide—real or imagined—to an extreme poetic sensationalism.
 - 25 Sydney Dobell, *The Poetical Works of Sydney Dobell*, 2 vols. (London, 1876), 2:5.
 - 26 On "unnatural [emotional] intensity" in Victorian dramatic monologues, see Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: Norton, 1963), esp. pp. 88-89.
 - 27 [W. E. Aytoun], "Firmilian: A Tragedy," *Blackwood's* 75 (May 1854): 534.
 - 28 Dobell himself seems to have experienced the world in much the same Spasmodic fashion his verses attempt to embody. On traveling through the Welsh mountains by train, for example, he "sat speechless the whole way. All my brain made chaos, heaving over and over. Too great for tears or any quick emotions" (letter to his parents, August 7, 1850 [*LL*, 1:120]). Dobell was also ill through much of his life, suffering from what his father described in 1844 as a "spasmodic action of the heart" (*LL*, 1:99).
 - 29 [Charles Kingsley], "Tennyson's Maud," *Fraser's* 52 (September 1855): 272.
 - 30 Herbert Spencer, "The Origin and Function of Music," *Fraser's* (October 1857); repr. in Spencer, *Essays: Scientific, Political, and Speculative* (London, 1868), p. 213.
 - 31 Victorian intellectuals agreed for the most part that passionate experience, though dangerous, was a necessary component of great art. Arthur Hallam, for example, writes glowingly in 1831 of what he calls the "poets of sensation," while yet cautioning of the "danger" in "linger[ing] with fond attachment in the vicinity of sense" ("On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry," *Englishman's Magazine* 1 [August 1831]: 616-628; repr. in *Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry 1830-1870*, ed. Isobel Armstrong [London: Athlone Press, 1972], pp. 87, 88). Mill, too, writes that the greatest of poets write "under the overruling influence of some one state of feeling"—and then warns against "stretching and straining; for strength, as Thomas Carlyle says, does not manifest itself in spasms" ("Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties" [1833], *Collected Works*, 1:360, 353).
 - 32 George Henry Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind* II, *The Physical Basis of the Mind*

- (London, 1877), p. 311.
- 33 George Levine has recently argued that “the question of how to universalize knowledge, lift it from mere contingency and singularity, pervades almost all nineteenth-century thought about how we know. Raw fact is not knowledge at all” (*Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002], p. 68). This is most definitely what is at stake for Lewes, who was a key figure in a circle of Victorian thinkers dedicated, to borrow the title of Diana Postlethwaite’s excellent book on the subject, to “making it whole”—that is, to finding proof of the universe’s manifold unity, and to discerning truth within that unity. Postlethwaite writes that throughout the 1850s, the project for Lewes and his friend Herbert Spencer was to determine “the unity of composition and the multiplicity of adaptation; in man, the animal kingdom, organic creation, and, in a grand progressive synthesis, the cosmos itself” (*Making It Whole*, p. 191). For Lewes’ contributions to Victorian thought, see also Peter Allan Dale, *In Pursuit of a Scientific Culture* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1989), esp. pp. 59-84.
- 34 [George Eliot], “Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young,” *Westminster Review* 67 (January 1857): 27.
- 35 [Eliot], “Belles Lettres,” *Westminster Review* 67 (January 1857): 307; emphasis mine.
- 36 [Eliot], “Belles Lettres,” *Westminster Review* 66 (October 1856): 567, 568. John M. Picker has recently suggested the importance to George Eliot of the German scientist Hermann von Helmholtz, who began work on acoustical physiology in 1856 (see *Victorian Soundscapes* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003], esp. pp. 84-99). Eliot’s essays on poetry in the 1850s pre-date Helmholtz’s important publications on the subject, and show Eliot to be thinking on the matter before she could have known of Helmholtz’s work. More likely sources for her early thinking on sound, rhythm, and physiology include Alexander Bain, an acquaintance of both Lewes and Eliot, and the discourse on rhythm inspired by the Spasmodic controversy.
- 37 [Arthur Hallam], “On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry,” p. 96; [Robert Buchanan], “The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr. D. G. Rossetti,” *Contemporary Review* 18 (1871): 335. On Hallam’s relation to empiricist philosophy, see Donald Hair, *Tennyson’s Language* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1991), pp. 41-56.
- 38 [Coventry Patmore], “New Poets,” *Edinburgh Review* 104 (1856): 340, 360.
- 39 “I hope,” writes Gosse, that “I may be dead before the English poets take Walt Whitman for their model in style” (Gosse, p. 71). Whitman records reading Smith’s *A Life-Drama* in his journal of 1854 (Walt Whitman, *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier [New York: New York Univ. Press, 1984], 5:1771).
- 40 Mathilde Blind, “Music and Moonlight,” *The Examiner* (March 28, 1874): 320.