

“A HATEFUL CAWING FROM THE CROWS”: COLLATERAL DAMAGE IN THE CULTURE WARS

By *Mischa Willett*

It is the fate
 Of genius that it cannot spread its wings,
 And soar triumphant to the welcoming clouds,
 Without a hateful cawing from the crows.

—W. E. Aytoun, *Firmilian*

W. E. AYTOUN’S SATIRICAL VERSE DRAMA, *Firmilian* (1854), an anti-radical, scattershot missive meant to re-align British poetic tastes¹ by reversing the aesthetic gains made by Romanticism in the decades prior to its publication, has been called “one of the most successful pieces of literary criticism ever written” (Morton 849). Despite its broad ambitions, however, it has often been read as a narrow attack on the individual poets popular during the summer of its appearance, creating a school where one had not existed before, turning the poets Philip James Bailey, Alexander Smith, Sydney Dobell and others into “the Spasmodic School.” But, as Charles LaPorte and Jason Rudy suggest,² despite a myth that grew up later in the century about *Firmilian*’s mighty power and the Spasmodic stars’ demise, the label hardly destroyed the poets associated therewith. So did *Firmilian* accomplish its purposes? In what ways can we consider it successful if not?

Scholars have frequently marked the transition between literary periods in the nineteenth-century as having occurred upon the death of Lord Byron in 1824, in part because the Victorians did likewise, shifting in general from speaking about poets as an inspired class, if a solipsistic, egocentric, genius-obsessed one, to speaking about them as craftspeople, duty-bound to the community. “When Byron passed away,” wrote Edward Bulwer-Lytton, “we awoke from the morbid, the passionate, the dreaming,” and, he adds, “with a sigh, turned to the actual and practical career of life” (286). Even prior to the ascension of Queen Victoria, then, poetry became Victorian, if by “Victorian” we mean to suggest neoclassical, staid, domestically and socially-integrated verse.³ However much scholars may resist such binaries now, they were clearly in place for many Victorian readers.

Bulwer-Lytton’s “sigh” is important, though. Not everyone heard that an old order was over and a new had begun. Upstart poets continued to write as though inspired and had summarily to be grounded by the critical class. That grounding campaign is chronicled

by Rolf P. Lessenich who shows how neoclassical satirists in the early nineteenth century managed to arrest the spread of Romantic aesthetics throughout culture, claiming that they did so as a way of preserving Tory political power. The method for the arrest, according to Lessenich, was to blacklist, through reviews and editorials, certain authors and aesthetic styles that might challenge newly re-erected classicist views of poetic decorum.

Such were the early Victorian culture wars described variously by Anthony Harrison, Florence Boos, and Ian Haywood who point out how far-reaching were their consequences, pulling in most of the intelligentsia and shifting significantly the course of Victorian poetics. The feuds were bitter, reddening the perception of criticism as a practice in the early part of the century even years later. While some editors cringed at the remembrance of the harsh treatment of poets at the hands of powerful editors,⁴ others recalled admiringly the time when editors “took to task, corrected, castigated, condemned with freedom, and praised but sparingly” (Millar 716). *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, the Tory engine, provided plenty of fodder for such recollections, often provoking fights. More sometimes than mere arguments, the feuds occasionally turned bloody, as in the pistol duel Richard Cronin recounts in *Paper Pellets* over an exchange of hostilities in *Blackwood’s* that led to the death of John Scott in 1821 (6).

A likely candidate for Millar’s castigating malefactor, Aytoun (1813–65) loved a good fight. The most influential editor of *Blackwood’s* after the heydays of Wilson and Lockhart’s editorships, Aytoun supported the Stuarts, railed against the railroads, and put down all manner of political agitation, serving as sheriff against the corn-law protestors. “In society, in politics, in literature,” assesses Weinstein, “he looked back to the past with an admiration approaching reverence. He distrusted the new and unusual because he ultimately disliked change” (37). Aytoun was an arch-conservative who viewed it his role both at the magazine and at the University of Edinburgh, where he was professor of Belles Lettres, to withstand the onslaught of progress with a rhetoric of venom matched only by his capacious wit. But his most vituperative ire he reserved for poets who violated his aesthetic standards.

Aytoun is best known for his satirical attack on such aspirants, a series of exchanges in *Blackwood’s* later worked into a long poem called *Firmilian* which had an outsized effect on Victorian aesthetics. As Florence Boos has shown, the poem’s effect was to “channel rebellious, experimental, and/or psychologically innovative impulses into fiction, and limit poetry’s scope to plots and settings which required a greater measure of classical or historical erudition from . . . readers” (9). Boos also mentions that the fallout from the debate surrounding *Firmilian* “blocked the entrance of working-class writers into the public sphere” such that, “no acknowledged ‘major’ poet of the second half of the century came from working or lower-class origins” (9). Harrison describes its cultural fallout, exemplified in exchanges between Matthew Arnold and Arthur Hugh Clough, in military terms. Kirstie Blair argues that connotations of gender in poetry of the period tilt on its axis. Editorial, reviewing, and publishing practices also shifted, some slightly, others drastically, around the *Firmilian* conflict.⁵

While some authors, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, were content simply to label Aytoun “the enemy” for his tirades against Romantic aesthetics, taking what reprisals may come, others took pains to avoid landing on his devastating blacklist. Christina Rossetti, for example, addressed Aytoun at *Blackwood’s* in the year of *Firmilian’s* publication in utmost timidity. “I am not unaware, Sir, that the editor of a magazine looks with dread

and contempt upon the offerings of a nameless rhymester," she begins, and, understanding Aytoun's charge of egotism throughout the *Firmilian* controversy, continues, "I hope that I shall not be misunderstood as guilty of egotism or foolish vanity, when I say that . . . poetry is with me, not as a mechanism, but an impulse and a reality" (Weinstein 190). That she imagines describing her poetry as guided by "impulse" will curry favor with the neo-Classicist defender shows how little Rossetti understood the aesthetic stakes in Aytoun's war.

In what Lessenich calls "polemical strategy of front-line formation," Aytoun bundled his enemies together to hit them all at once, his blacklist of poetic offenders long and diverse (387). Lessenich shows how *Firmilian* was meant to attack Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Poe, Longfellow, and Goethe. It meant especially to harm Keats, for whom Aytoun harbored a particular animosity.⁶ In sum, the whole stargazing Romantic and neo-Romantic firmament was implicated. But of all the poetic offenders *Firmilian* meant to condemn, textual evidence shows that two seldom-acknowledged targets were chief: Ernest Charles Jones and John Martin.

Jones topped the blacklist. Interest in his career has rekindled recently through broader attention to Chartism, through attention to working-class poetics generally, and through monographs concerned with his politics.⁷ The last Chartist leader, he was known as the end of the gentleman radical tradition and as a figure whose poetry helped negotiate his various roles across the European-revolutionary social spectrum. He was an intimate of both Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, with whom he maintained long correspondences. As an editor, Jones was prodigious, publishing at least six periodicals from 1850–60, all of them including poetry. Many of these, such as the *Northern Star* and the *Labourer*, were popular successes, even if they were not financial ones.⁸ After his death, Jones was remembered as a poet, with memorial readings of his verse taking place as late as 1879 (Taylor 6). In addition to the huge success of *Chartist Songs*, which "were recited and sung all over Britain," he wrote political propaganda, such as *The Right of Public Meeting* (1851); Shelleyan epics such as *The Revolt of Hindostan* (1857); novels such as *The Wood-Spirit* (1841); and speeches, orations, an autobiography, and abundant original verse.

Scholars have not usually associated Jones with the Spasmodic school or with Aytoun's criticism thereof,⁹ but three components of Aytoun's critical performance in *Firmilian* signal Jones as a primary target: the poem's subtitle, the adopted pseudonym, and the introduction. The full title of the 1854 publication is *Firmilian; the Student of Badajoz, a Spasmodic Tragedy*; the subtitle helps identify its target. Badajoz, a small town on the Portuguese/Spanish border, was famously host to one of the bloodiest battles of Wellington's peninsular war. There, in 1812, British and allied forces laid siege to a French garrison and took it after unusually heavy casualties. Upset by the enormous loss of life, the British troops broke rank and spent three days pillaging the city, slaying the innocent, and generally running amok. Julian Paget describes the victory as an orgy of civilian rape and murder (171). For the British population back home, such behavior was unthinkable. Disorder, spontaneous uprising, and the dismissal of (especially military) hierarchy were traits associated with the French. According to Paget it "took three days for the leaders to regain command" (171). For Aytoun, spontaneity and exuberance were discomfiting terms, qualities of mobs and terrorists more than fit modes for poetic expression. Fresh in the minds of Aytoun's generation, a comparison to the soldiers at Badajoz was damaging indeed, suggesting that radicalism in verse and a disrespect of formal authority might lead to actual rioting on the order of the Wellington debacle.

But “Badajoz” is not the only titular signal. The framing – A Student of – likewise points away from the new school poetics of Smith, Dobell, Bailey, and Bigg. Aytoun’s *A Student of Badajoz* is meant to satirize *The Student of Padua* written by Jones in 1836. Also a verse-drama, *A Student of Padua* follows a father, Lorenzo, trying to convince a son, Julian, to make something of himself. Julian, however, is one of those drifters, “a kind of forager upon society,” as another character puts it (Jones 5). The two titles’ parallel construction is too perfect for coincidence.

Further evidence that Aytoun meant to harm Jones with the publication of *Firmilian* is the pseudonym under which he authors it: T. Percy Jones. The coded references are usually read as a conflation of “[Alexander] Smith’s workaday surname with that of Jones the Chartist, enlisting pre-Spasmodic rebel Percy Shelley for good measure, and taking a rhythmic swat at poor J. Stanyan Bigg by the way” (Tucker 441). But the matter may be simpler than that. In 1846, Jones published a semi-fictional autobiography under the pseudonym “Percy Vere.” As Tucker points out, the name “Percy” was likely chosen because Jones admired Shelley, as did most Chartists, and the “Vere” comes from a character Jones admired in Tennyson’s poem “Lady Clara Vere de Vere,” about whom he wrote an essay in 1847. If we think of Jones as a primary target rather than an ancillary one, the pseudonym’s attribution clarifies: *The Student of Badajoz* by “T. Percy Jones” is meant to lampoon *The Student of Padua* by E. “Percy” Jones.

Thirdly, we know Aytoun means to target figures like Jones because of *Firmilian*’s introductory essay, in which the author dismisses all authority and compares his poetic achievement with Shakespeare’s, daring readers to set “[Firmilian] beside Iago, Richard III, or the two Macbeths,” and assuring them that “he will not look dark in comparison” (vii). Aytoun does a good Jones impression, picking up the disregard for critical opinion evidenced in Jones’ prefaces. *The Student of Padua*’s introduction bubbles with vitriol for the periodicals machine and professional critics like Aytoun. Jones excoriates the idols of the publishing industry rather than ingratiating himself either thereto or to his readers. Not for him any of this “Gentle Reader, I admonish thee,” nor even any of Christina Rossetti’s postures toward the powerful editor. With egotism, sarcasm, and reluctance to be bothered in the first place, he begins, “as all readers most unreasonably expect from all writers the reason why anything is written, the author of the following drama considers himself bound to explain” (v). Rather than offering an apology, Jones describes his poem

as scorning to pamper the delicate sensibilities of hypocrites and slaves . . . in venturing to expose the truth . . . and as its author holds in perfect contempt and absolute ridicule all critical axioms and regulations for drama . . . he neither anticipates the support of the periodical press in England, nor fears its abuse. (v)

If there were a more direct route to arousing the ire of the critical class, especially as embodied in the leading Tory periodical and the man whose mission it was personally to uphold traditional conceptions of poetry, Jones would have found it. Aytoun was directly challenged and made to play the fool, by, of all people, a Chartist, rioter, and poetaster.

We know Aytoun is an enemy of Jones, intending to skewer his work with *Firmilian* three ways: by his punning on Jones’s name, by the subtitle’s reference to one of Jones’s major poems, and by Aytoun’s answer to the challenge Jones laid out in his preface. Why would

he harbor such an animus? One reason is that Aytoun routinely attacked people with whom he disagreed, especially about politics. As leader of the Chartists, Jones would already have been considered an enemy combatant by Aytoun. As editor of several successful journals, he would have been a competitor. For Aytoun, Jones’s influence was destabilizing and his work threatening because of its connection with the reform movement in Britain and to revolutionaries abroad. But though Aytoun certainly means to attack Jones with *Firmilian*, the Chartist leader is not the only object of his scorn. He has other artistic enemies in mind as well.

John Martin painted highly-successful scenes of biblical apocalypse and advocated sweeping architectural and civic reforms for London, which he viewed as a depraved Babylon. He imagined a coming crisis as the Thames continued to act both as water source and sewer. If he sometimes thought metropolitan improvement schemes such as the Thames Embankment or a continuous London greenbelt might save mankind, he imagined just as often that the whole human race would soon be wiped out in a cloud of fire, as in *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* (1852) or given over to their sins, as in *Belshazzar’s Feast* (1820). Such scenes were enormously popular in the mid-century when a language of apocalypticism was rampant, and they often carried a political charge. Paintings such as Martin’s *The Great Day of his Wrath* (1851–53) awed and terrified audiences by combining sublime spectacle with a moral pressure. That Martin was a friend of William Godwin’s suggests his political leanings.

It is evident that Aytoun meant to make a fool of Martin with *Firmilian* because the poem satirizes an event from Martin’s actual life. *Firmilian*’s motivating action, to the extent that it has one, is the protagonist’s explosion of a cathedral. No mere invention of the imagination, or allegory about loss of respect for tradition, *Firmilian*’s fire really happened. Martin’s brother, Jonathan, set out, it would seem, to incarnate an apocalyptic disaster scene by setting fire to York Minster in 1829, causing what has been described as one of the most spectacular consequences of arson in modern British history. Much of the church was destroyed, including the choir stalls, the Bishop’s chair, and the altar. Jonathan was likely a manic depressive, and historians have usually explained that a buzzing noise in the organ one Sunday set him off. Importantly though, Martin had threatened the bishop in the past and had hung placards in the loft denouncing him prior to the fateful visit. His trial was a public affair, Martin defended by Baron Brougham, famous for having defended Queen Caroline in the reformist trial of 1821. His brother, by now an immensely famous painter, spoke on his behalf in the courts.

Aytoun would have known all of this and associated Martin with political reformist movements like Chartism and Queen Caroline, adding no longer the threat, but the practice of violence. It is possible, too, that Aytoun may have confused or conflated Jonathan Martin with his brother John. If so, it’s not hard to imagine the threat to conservatism greater from John the painter than from his arsonist brother. The latter set fire to a cathedral and was summarily sent to a mental institution. The former, a public and much-admired figure, was a reformer who advocated huge changes and public works projects, and a painter of huge, sensational fires. One can imagine Professor Aytoun sitting in a Tory club shaking his head at the world going to Badajoz in a hand-basket: first they paint scenes of wild destruction and then enact them!

We know Aytoun aims *Firmilian* at the Martins’ reformist tendencies and lacks of control because he places a cathedral fire as a result of radical ideas as the satire’s main motivating action:

What if the flash
 Should rend the solid walls, and reach the vault,
 Where my terrestrial thunder lies prepared,
 And so, without action of my hand,
 Whirl up those thousand bigots in its blaze. (74)

This passage belies Aytoun's true anxiety: "what if the flash / should rend the solid walls?" or what if flashy painters of horrible spectacle become the norm, undermining staid traditions of artistic respectability? What if creators of those spectacles – terrorists, really – are considered heroes? Is nothing sacred? Again here, the style is as much under attack as the politics. Aytoun equates progressivism with bombast, spectacle with disrespect for tradition, and both with disorder.

Firmilian was meant as a check not only on aesthetic extravagances, but on their practical consequences: Jones's Chartist rioting, Martin's terrorism. Given that, a possible third target arises. *Firmilian's* inclusion of striking metaphors and sensational subject matter that aestheticize the practice of violence may also mean to implicate De Quincey's *Murder Considered as a Fine Art* (1827). *Blackwood's* had a history of lampooning De Quincey for just such excesses. As far back as 1823,¹⁰ Maga called "Yon Opium Tract" a "desperate . . . confession" and "a perfectly dreadful yon pourin in upon you o' oriental imagery" (485–86). More importantly, De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* apparently had drawn acolytes. *Blackwood's* editors admitted to trying the "lowdnam" after reading De Quincey's "wee wud wicked work," intimating that others, who had done likewise, died from overdoses: "pray, is it true that your Confessions have caused . . . fifty unintentional suicides?" (485). The review is a farce, but the sentiment is real. For establishment figures like Aytoun, the social ramifications of De Quincey's work are at least as important as the aesthetic ones. And if impressionable readers first took to drug use following *Confessions*, what might they do following a reading of *Murder*?

Despite the evidence showing that Jones and Martin were Aytoun's principal targets, he was nevertheless taken by some¹¹ contemporaries as aiming at the young poets popular during the summer of *Firmilian's* publication, especially Smith and Dobell. Partly, the connection is due to timing. Just when Aytoun was readying to attack dreamy, avant-gardist poets and their breathless publics, a pair of poets appeared over whom the public enthused like none before them. Smith new that the critical reaction to his first book was hyperbolic and predicted a backlash, which came in the form of the public's association of his work with Aytoun's newly formed "Spasmodics." Though Smith never owns up to the categorization, Dobell himself calls *Firmilian* "a happy burlesque on me and Alexander."

Partly too, the connection is due to *Firmilian's* broadly allusive style. Nothing in *Firmilian* can fairly be said to echo Bailey, or Bigg. Any possible references to the former are more likely meant for Goethe, whom Aytoun had been translating for years. And though most of *Firmilian's* direct allusions are to Byron, Keats, Goethe and Shakespeare, of one figure it is said "he railed at Mother Rome and called her Babylon," which is likely a reference to Dobell's *The Roman*. Elsewhere, *Firmilian* begins an aria with "I knew a poet once, and he was a youth" (47), a neat verbal echo of Smith's recollections of poets past in *A Life-Drama*.¹² Surely then, Aytoun had seen their books and, probably, he didn't care for them.

In fact, Smith and Dobell, and to a lesser extent Bigg and Bailey, embodied all that Aytoun disapproved of in modern verse, but they were ancillary targets, merely the latest

incarnation of a type he'd long fought against: Romantics. Though they were lower on the blacklist than others, and though Aytoun probably did loathe the sort of poetry they wrote, Smith and Dobell were understood by many to be chief targets because they were connected with Aytoun's great critical enemy: George Gilfillan.

A well-known preacher, author of prodigious output, and editor of scores of volumes, Gilfillan helped put Dundee on the literary map, encouraging her poets and shaping Scotland's literary identity through promotion of her greats. When Ralph Waldo Emerson visited Scotland, he lectured in Dundee to visit Gilfillan, his friend and early champion.¹³ Harriet Beecher Stowe did likewise. His biographies of Scott and Burns, and promotion of then-marginal figures like Poe, Shelley, and Thomas Hood shaped readerly tastes to a degree only possibly bested by Carlyle and later, Matthew Arnold. A recent biography by Aileen Black demonstrates Gilfillan's critical influence in mid-Victorian Scotland, but even in his own century it was said that no one “did more to quicken, especially in the young Scotchman, the love of literature” than did Gilfillan (Edwards 111).

Gilfillan is the figure symbolically crushed by a falling body thrown from the castle wall in *Firmilian*. The very name of the drama may be a play on the great critic's name: “Gilfillan,” though the resonance is just as likely meant to be “vermilion,” a pun on Aytoun's famous distaste for “purple” (i.e., overwritten) passages. Importantly, though, the two had feuded famously before the *Firmilian* controversy. Having taken opposing views of the Scottish Covenanters struggle, each roared his position and lambasted the other's. Aytoun, for instance, called Claverhouse “the last of Scots, the last of freemen,” in *Lays of the Scots Cavaliers* (73). Gilfillan took the opposite view, writing that “the memory of the wicked shall rot and over the grave of Clavers, the crown of crime seems to sit shadowy on the turf” (218). Gilfillan launched numerous attacks on Aytoun's own poetry and critical ability, of which the following, from *The Eclectic*, is representative: “Aytoun's tone is the small spite of a schoolboy who confounds impudence with cleverness . . . contortions without the inspiration, the buffooneries or profanities of Falstaff without his wit” (114). Their conflict is important because seeing Aytoun's *Firmilian* attack as just one more volley in a long-running war between the two critics whose origins predated any of the Spasmodic poets' productions complicates the notion that Aytoun was provoked by Smith, Dobell and Bigg into frothing response.

The Spasmodics are so often considered Aytoun's targets because an attack on Gilfillan, it is assumed, necessarily brought in his acolytes, but there are two problems with this guilt by association. First, Aytoun is attacking Gilfillan, not the poets he'd discovered. He probably doesn't mind injuring his enemy's protégés, but they are not the principal targets. Second, Gilfillan defended the talent and reputation of many poets under conservative attack, besides those now known as Spasmodics, writing in defense of Shelley, Keats, Byron, Poe and several others regarding whose work literary history has taken Gilfillan's side, as against Aytoun's.

Whether or not he meant to include some of the new discoveries, Aytoun certainly meant to destroy Gilfillan and some scholars have it that he succeeded. They argue that “Aytoun killed [Gilfillan] off as a critical force,” and that “after *Firmilian*, he found it impossible to find a market for more literary discoveries” (Berry 88). Others suggest that, chastened by Aytoun's lampoon, Gilfillan focused on others' writing, rather than his own (Blair 92). But I share LaPorte and Rudy's skepticism regarding Aytoun's influence. He was a powerful critic, but not powerful enough to take down a figure of Gilfillan's stature.

Far from having a difficult time finding audience after being symbolically crushed by Aytoun, Gilfillan continues writing, publishing, and finding favorable reviews. His *Gallery of Literary Portraits* continues to be reprinted into the twentieth century, as does *Martyrs, Bards, and Heroes of the Scottish Covenant*. Post-*Firmilian*, he publishes an influential essay on Burns, timed to coincide with Smith's edition of same in 1857, and then produces what would have been the life's work of any less-productive writer: the 48-volume *Library Edition of Poets of Britain*, as well as biographies of Walter Scott, Burns, and several churchmen, to say nothing of his own poems and sermons.¹⁴ He also continues fighting with his old enemy, writing, "[Aytoun's] existence . . . has been one long spasm of weakness determined to be strong . . . [;] he has set himself, in the true spirit of an ape, to rail at and caricature the true men and poets of the age" (qtd. in Berry 172). Whether we agree with Gilfillan's assessment of Aytoun's powers or not, we can hardly grant that his tone is chastened. Not only does he continue to produce and to sell both literary and critical work, but his influence extends to the corners of the empire. When he dies, laudatory obituaries pour in from its span. Though some now imagine that Gilfillan died forgotten, the remembrances themselves were so popular, they were grouped and published together as a collectable volume. By century's end – twenty-two years after his death – memoirs and biographies of Gilfillan were still going into multiple editions.

If Aytoun failed to extinguish his old enemy, one thing he succeeded in doing, and that wildly, was to create a school of poets. In reality individual poets trying to write like Shelley, and after the manner of Bailey's massively successful *Festus*, the poets popular during the summer of 1854 became known, entirely because of Aytoun's intervention, as a school: the Spasmodics, a term that signals at once a group of writers and a style tried on by other writers such as Tennyson, Browning, Barret-Browning, and even Arnold. Because the term took, Dobell's biographer employs it, writing that Dobell "was a member of the spasmodic school, with which he was, during his residence in Edinburgh, topographically associated" (Dobell xix). Smith's biographer also employs the term, though only to impugn *Firmilian's* "intrinsic poetic worth" while still noting that it was "well-timed" and that the word "Spasmodic" was "like a barbed arrow, which, hitting, stuck" (Brisbane 189–90).

The name stuck because it was apt, not because it was well-aimed. Rudy provides the most thorough history of the term "Spasmodic," noting that it had been a medical term suggesting shaking wildness before being pressed into service by Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell as an emotional state.¹⁵ He argues that Aytoun borrows the term from Charles Kingsley, which may be right, but Aytoun may also have in mind Carlyle's contrast of Goethe's "strength" with "so much *spasmodic* Byronism, bellowing till its windpipe is cracked."¹⁶ Carlyle and Dobell were friends, so Aytoun may have associated them, calling up the term for *Firmilian's* subtitle. It stuck with the public in part because they were invited to participate; Aytoun's first savagery of the invented Spasmodic poet T. Percy Jones was so severe that compassionate readers wrote in to *Blackwood's* to defend him, and "Spasmodism" by extension. However much the term had been in use to describe literary efforts prior to 1854, there was no "Spasmodic school" before Aytoun's satire and its perceived victims. What had merely been a derogatory adjective became first a style and then the group of poets whom readers believed had popularized that style. But, as in Gilfillan's case, the label hardly destroyed the young poets so named.

Smith, for example, wrote more poetry following *Firmilian* than he had before it, poetry which evidences no turn toward "simple themes," of which some have accused him,¹⁷ imagining that he, like, Gilfillan was killed off by Aytoun's powerful invective. Far from

feeling cowed by the satire, Smith attempted grander projects still thereafter. His next production, a collaboration with Dobell entitled *Sonnets on the War* (1855), articulates political positions on France, Hungary, and the American Revolutionary and Crimean wars in what Stefanie Markovits calls “the most interesting of the [Crimean] war poems” (132). He follows that with the volume containing the poem “Glasgow,” described by Edwin Morgan as “among the earliest attempts to bring positive and powerful images of the industrial city environment” (341). Morgan also notes that “Glasgow” is the poem for which Smith tends to be remembered. The other contestant for that title must be “Barbara,” hailed by Herbert B. Grimsditch as “one of the best things Smith ever wrote,” also from that latter volume (12). Far from his poetic career being over after Aytoun’s satire, it appears that Smith’s signal achievements lay still ahead. Nor does he shy from epic, the genre whose undertaking drew so much fire. His *Edwin of Deira* (1861) is a medieval romance greater in scale than any poem he had yet attempted. Smith didn’t retreat following Aytoun’s satire, nor did *Firmilian* in any sense end his career. He didn’t even move away from poetry to prose, as has sometimes been suggested, but wrote and published verse until his death, some pieces running only weeks prior, and others left to be printed posthumously.¹⁸

Furthermore, as Simon Berry points out, Smith’s work in all genres continued to find publishers. We might imagine that after such a blow as Aytoun delivered, periodicals would be reluctant to feature the chastened bard, but periodicals such as the *Caledonian Mercury*, the *Spectator*, the *Leader*, the *National Review*, *Good Words*, the *Argosy*, the *Spectator*, among several others proudly featured Smith’s post-*Firmilian* work. When, in 1857, the *Athenaeum* created a second controversy surrounding Smith’s poems with a later-discredited plagiarism charge, editors – David Masson of *Macmillan’s*, for example – came to the poet’s defense, unembarrassed to be associated with him. Book publishers too, either unaware of *Firmilian’s* bewildering impact or in open defiance thereof, continued to seek out, to publish, and to promote not only Smith’s prose, but his poetry too.

Nor did Smith’s newly published work molder on bookshop shelves. Both poetry and prose, both in America and in the United Kingdom, continued to find appreciative audiences and to garner positive reviews. Even *Sonnets on the War*, the book that immediately followed *Firmilian*, and which was authored by not one, but two of the Spasmodic School’s brightest, and should therefore have sunk like a stone, “received ecstatic reviews” and “healthy sales” (Berry 93). One critic assessed his last as “the best epic poem which the age of Tennyson, Longfellow, and Mrs. Browning has yet seen” (Dublin 67). Neither can we say *Firmilian* made a dent in the sale of Smith’s first and most Spasmodic book, *Poems* (1853), which continued to be reprinted until 1889, rather a long shelf-life for a first book by an unknown working-class writer. His death in 1867 spawned favorable obituaries, biographies, and career reflections across the literary landscape: not at all the treatment of a forgotten poet.

As with Smith, so with Dobell. Nothing about his work following 1854 suggests a corrective of ambition or style. As Rudy demonstrates in *Electric Meters*, Dobell works throughout the 1850s on a serious consideration of the physiological effects of poetry on the body (82–95). Like Smith, he continued writing and publishing, increasing in public stature through the 1860’s. He too published more poems after *Firmilian* than before it. Following his presumed demise in 1854, Dobell published in periodicals such as the *National Magazine*, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, *Good Words*, the *Saint Paul’s Magazine*, the *Athenaeum*, the *Argosy*, *Chamber’s Journal*, the *London Journal*, and others. Still others published

long extracts of his work in reviews. In fact, publications mentioning Dobell increase from 1860–69 over those from 1850–59 and then again in the period 1870–79.¹⁹ Statistically, at least, he grows more popular following his “sudden and complete fall,” than he had been before it.²⁰ Despite a severe illness, he published several books of new poems, themselves followed, after his death, by collected editions, anthologies, collections of letters, and appreciative biographies.

As in Smith’s case, many of these post-*Firmilian* publications are called Dobell’s best work. For example, Dante Gabriel Rossetti assessed Dobell’s “Keith of Ravelston” thus:

I have always regarded that poem as being one of the finest, of its length, in any modern poet — ranking with Keats’s “La Belle Dame sans Merci” and the other masterpieces of the condensed and hinted order so dear to imaginative minds. (420)

Upon Dobell’s death in 1874, *The Atheneum* — no friend to Spasmodism — called him “a writer of eminence and a man whose career brought him no enemies” (314). Had they forgotten the heady days twenty years previous when Dobell and his fellow Spasmodics were crushed by harsh criticism? That review goes on to state that “the reputation of Dobell can scarcely be said to have stood higher a score years ago than it now stands,” a claim which, if true, by itself refutes assessments of the poet’s critical demise. In 1950, when W. H. Auden edited *Poets of the English Language*, an anthology containing what he took to be the flowers of English verse, the selections he chose from Sydney Dobell all dated post-*Firmilian*. As with Smith, reprints of Dobell’s books continued into the twentieth century.

If Smith and Dobell continue to write and to publish some of their strongest and most beloved verse following Aytoun’s intervention, surely J. Stanyan Bigg — the poet T. Percy Jones is thought to lampoon by name — is vanquished therewith. He is often pronounced, with the movement itself, dead on the scene.²¹ But if this is so, *The Scottish Review* could hardly argue, in 1862,

John Stanyan Bigg has now for nine years been favorably known to the public, as one of the brightest of that cluster which, under the name . . . “Spasmodic Poets,” has . . . delighted the public, and added additional luster to the literature of the age. (243)

Such a claim could be made, but would have to take the form of an argument. Here, the editor is trading on accepted belief that Bigg is a genius, and he doesn’t seem to expect rebuttal, and this a full eight years after the “end of the movement.” This particular editor’s comment is important because it signals not only continued appreciation for Bigg’s poems but enthusiasm for the perceived school of writers to which he belongs, using the term “Spasmodic” without derision or irony. Though Bigg devoted most of his energies following 1854 to editing the *Northern Star*, he still wrote not only individual poems but books, which again found favorable reception, following the successful *Night and the Soul* (1854) with *Shifting Scenes* (1862), containing “An Irish Picture,” the poem of Bigg’s most frequently anthologized, as Kerry McSweeney notes, today.

Neither the individual authors implicated, nor the group itself disappears following Aytoun’s intervention. Lessenich’s report that “spasmodic poetry sold extremely well . . . during the whole Victorian period” is a necessary correction to period evaluations that read

Spasmodism as a fad from the 1850’s that disappeared quickly thereafter (389). Rather, he says, “[Spasmodic literature] presents a constant challenge” (389). LaPorte and Rudy are right then to praise not only the breadth and complexity, but also “the longevity of the Spasmodic phenomenon,” not only because the poets’ pre-*Firmilian* works were influential throughout the era in spite of harsh criticism – although that’s true also – but because, wherever Aytoun’s critical cannons were aimed, the Spasmodics sailed right through the smoke, more or less unfazed (426). If, as I am suggesting, *Firmilian* was meant as a correction of course, from Lessenich’s “neu-Romantic extravagance” founded on what Harrison calls a “markedly opposed system of aesthetic value” to the high culture Aytoun expected from poets such as Matthew Arnold, none of this should be surprising (511). *Firmilian* failed to bring down Smith, Dobell, or Bigg – failed fantastically to decrease sales of Bailey’s century-long bestseller *Festus*, or to silence the productive Gilfillan, but those are not faults, nor do they evidence Aytoun’s critical inefficacy. Bringing down those poets was never his intention.

True, for some early reviewers the term “Spasmodic” signaled the new school aesthetics of Smith, Bailey, Dobell, and Bigg. *The New Quarterly* wrote in 1855²² that, “In plain, unmistakable words, Mr. T. Percy Jones appears to us to have written this tragedy in order to ridicule the class of poems, whereof *Balder*, by Mr. Sydeny Yendys,²³ is the last prominent example (82). But it did not do so for all.

Other contemporaries of Aytoun’s were uncertain about the objects of his ire. *The Atheneum*, for example, writes of *Firmilian*, “if brevity be the soul of wit, this story is sadly too long for jest,” and then, in a less allusive mode, “a parody for which any considerable success is to be expected, should be founded on some poem, or passage of a poem, that everyone can recall at will” (1165). While this may sound like another dig at the Spasmodics, in September 1854, when “nothing was talked of but Alexander Smith,” Smith’s was a poem everyone could recall at will. In other words, the article asks, who is lampooned here, anyway?

Other contemporaries sought specifically to decry the association of the new poets with Aytoun’s animus. *The Eclectic*, for example, writes, “Smith was by no means representative of the new school,” but that

when Professor Aytoun’s jocular phrase, “Spasmodic Poetry” got abroad and began to serve, with clever people as well as with blockheads, as a convenient substitute for further inquiry into the thing it designated, Mr. Smith was necessarily included in the obloquy. (701)

But then, he assures “the good-humored Aytoun was far from having intended this, for he was one of Smith’s most familiar Edinburgh friends” (701). Alas, such maneuvers failed to create the necessary critical distance and *Firmilian*’s ancillary targets were read as the primary ones, and primary ones forgotten.

Whether Aytoun intended a broad attack on weepy Romantic aesthetics as against neo-classical ideas of poetic decorum, or a narrow attack on the dangerous social progressives Jones and Martin, or some combination of the two, the effect of his work was to inaugurate and to satirize a poetic school with fixed members and characteristics. Later in the century, mainly via career retrospectives published upon their deaths, a myth grew up about the Spasmodic poets’ demise at the hands of a powerful critic. Slotting the Keatsian writers into the typical Keatsian narrative of young Romantics crushed by critical caprice, people started giving it out that though most of the English-speaking world was aflame with excitement in the 1850s

for a new group of young poets writing a charged and imagistic verse, the presses exhaustive in their praise, and the poetic establishment beside itself in admiration, one man didn't much appreciate this new way of writing and put an end to the whole thing by making fun of it in a brilliant and biting satire that extinguished the public's early ardor and effectively ended the poets' careers. But the evidence suggests that isn't quite how it happened. The myth was allowed to perpetuate because, despite their continued output and sales, most of the individuals tarred with the Spasmodic brush actually did disappear, but for other reasons.

The first reason some of the public turned against Smith and Dobell particularly was because the initial embrace was so suffocating. Dobell's wife wrote that no volume in history had ever made such an impact as *The Roman*. That may be a case of special pleading, but the only other contenders for that title are Smith's – whose debut Cronin says “made an impact unmatched in the Victorian era” or Bailey's, which may well be the bestselling British poem of the nineteenth century. All three major Spasmodics stunned the literary world with their first productions. Other writers, such as Coventry Patmore, whose book, according to William Rossetti,²⁴ was “utterly extinguished . . . by the avalanche of Alexander Smith” grew jealous of the public's embrace of the young poets and retaliated, Patmore later authoring his own omnibus review²⁵ of the school, putting forth an unsurprisingly unsavory assessment.

The second reason the Spasmodics faded from public view is that their subsequent works failed to deliver on the promises of the debuts. Each of these authors experienced a sophomore slump,²⁶ picked up on by readers who viewed their second books as unworthy successors to the daring, startling, early works.

The third reason the movement appeared to have died following the *Firmilian* controversy is that the figures themselves did. Smith and Dobell particularly suffered strange ailments that appeared to be connected with nervousness. Smith died at 37 from diphtheria and Dobell at 38 of complications from a horse-riding accident. If no one heard much from the Spasmodics in the 1860s and 70s, it wasn't because the movement was a flash in the pan that quickly burnt out, but because there were no more Spasmodics from whom to hear.²⁷

Despite all this, Morton is right to claim that *Firmilian* should count among the great works of criticism. Not because it destroyed the careers of some young poets for whose mentor Aytoun harbored an animus; it didn't. As I have shown, Smith, Dobell, and Bailey's books continued to find appreciative, even expanding, audiences before their authors' deaths and to be re-printed into the next century, longer even than most of Aytoun's. Nor is *Firmilian* a great work because it materially altered the ambitions of the book's real political targets, Jones and Martin, who likewise persisted despite Aytoun's petulance. But it did create a school of poetry where none had existed before. If we read Smith, Dobell, Bigg, or Bailey now, we do so because we are thinking about a certain branch of aesthetics, or a certain period in Victorian literary history. Every respectable survey of the period includes a section on the Spasmodics, not because any individual author's work was so important, but because together, they form a discernable type of writing and a unique cultural moment. In short, we only read them because they are members of the Spasmodic school, and they are only thus because of Aytoun.

Firmilian is also important because, as satires do, the poem and the controversy surrounding it managed to make Romantic aesthetics seem foolish, at least for a time. There was the feeling that a page had turned in the book of style. Though Victorians continued to appreciate Keats and Shelley (and Smith, Bailey, and all the other figures on Aytoun's blacklist) they did so with a kind of nostalgia for a gone period. It seemed, if lovely, juvenile,

compared with the harder, more healthy and even-keeled, work of the present. Their way of confronting the world belonged thereafter to a – what other word for it? – romantic past.

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NOTES

1. Weinstein's *W. E. Aytoun and the Spasmodic Controversy* provides the most complete treatment of the satire and the pitched cultural battle surrounding it.
2. For LaPorte and Rudy, views that emphasize Spasmodism's ephemerality "overstat[e] the influence of their detractors – especially Aytoun" (426).
3. See for example, LaPorte and Rudy on R. H. Home's "confrontation," in his *New Spirit of the Age*, "between Romantic style poetics and a more restrained model of composition" (422).
4. *The Eclectic*, for instance, writes "however it happened, the publication of [Alexander] Smith's . . . *Poems* was the signal for bringing out an onslaught . . . more ill-natured than any critical attack we remember" (701).
5. See also ch. 3 in Buckley *The Victorian Temper*; chs. 7 and 10 in Armstrong *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Politics, Poetics*; and ch. 9 in Tucker *The Epic: Britain's Historic Muse 1790–1910*.
6. Uncannily, Aytoun inherited his posts both at University of Edinburgh and at *Blackwood's* from his father-in-law, John Wilson who as "Christopher North," wrote the damning review of young Keats in *The Quarterly Review* believed by Shelley, Byron, and Hazlitt to have killed him. If it is even partially true about the effect of the Wilson's review on Keats, or of Aytoun's on the Spasmodics, they may be the most damaging family, poetically-speaking, in history.
7. See Sanders, *The Poetry of Chartism: Aesthetics, Politics, History*; Taylor's *Ernest Jones, Chartism, and the Romance of Politics 1819–1869*, and Boos, "Class and Victorian Poetics."
8. Haywood puts actual circulation (rather than sales) of the *Northern Star* in the 100,000s (143).
9. Weinstein fails to mention Jones at all, nor is he regularly included among the group's members. The exceptions are Saintsbury, *A Short History of English Literature*, which lists the Spasmodics as Bailey, Dobell, Smith, "and perhaps a few others, such as Ernest Jones, the Chartist Lawyer" (776) and Tucker who suggests Aytoun's pseudonym as a conflation of Smith, Jones, and Percy Shelley's names.
10. Some might wonder why Aytoun, working under the periodical press' imperative of currency, would trot back to attack De Quincey, whose *Murder* was published twenty-three years previous to *Firmilian*, but far from being removed from the public eye at the time, *Murder* had just been publicly resurrected. "A second paper" on *Murder* was issued in 1839 and a "post script" in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1854, the very year of *Firmilian's* publication. Also, De Quincey had been much in the headlines in the year prior, since the British edition of his *Collected Works* had just begun, and material collected for the American version (Lindop 373). Volumes 1–3 of his *Selections Grave and Gay* had appeared to great success, with large extracts appearing in the *Globe*, and volume 4, containing *Murder*, had just been announced in the press. If De Quincey was a target of the *Firmilian* satire, Aytoun timed it perfectly.
11. *Firmilian's* first reviews, such as "The Spasmodic Drama," *Dublin University Magazine*, 1833–77; Oct 1854; vol. 44, no. 262; 488 mention neither Smith, Dobell, Bailey, nor any of the other figures who became known as the Spasmodic poets.
12. Connections other scholars have made between the character Sancho and Alexander Smith I find unconvincing. The two share neither subject nor style and are only grouped because Sancho is a "new discovery" for Apollodorus in the same way Smith was for Gilfillan.

13. See Townsend, Scudder III. "Emerson in Dundee."
14. See Black.
15. See introductory memoir by Mrs. Dobell in *The Poems of Sydney Dobell*. Ed. William Sharp, Walter Scott, 1887: xi. As Cronin in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, notes that Aytoun had employed the term "Spasmodic" once before *Firmilian*, in a review of Smith's first book, but he is in no way attempting to christen a school or a movement there; he is simply describing a quality of joy – that it is fleeting – by using a medical term for "unsteady" or "given to fits." See *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* vol. 75 (Mar. 1854): 348.
16. Quoted here from Rutherford's *Lord Byron: the Critical Heritage*.
17. Weinstein argues that "after *A Life-Drama*, Smith selects simple themes for his verse," and that the controversy broke his career into two parts; realizing "his poetic career was over . . . Smith turned to prose" (172).
18. I'm thinking here of the affective "Autumn Homily," published in *The Quiver* on December 1, 1866. Smith died on January 5.
19. See Proquest British Periodicals Database yields for "Sydney Dobell" in 1850–59, 1860–69, and 1870–79.
20. Weinstein 191.
21. Buckley *The Victorian Temper* has it that upon *Firmilian*'s publication in 1854, J. Stanyan Bigg is "forgotten" (60).
22. Review of *Firmilian; or, The Student of Badajoz. A Spasmodic Tragedy*. *The New Quarterly Review* 4.13 (Jan. 1855): 82–85.
23. Dobell's early *nom de plume*.
24. William Michael Rossetti to William Bell Scott, 23 Oct 1853.
25. Patmore. attr. rev. of "Festus: a Poem," *The Edinburgh Review* (337–62).
26. Smith's *City Poems*, Bailey's *Angel World*, and Dobell's *Balder* were all called disappointing by reviewers.
27. The exception is Bailey, who lived to 86, but he was a reclusive figure, living far from literary centers. Still, even until the last years of his life, visitors made pilgrimages to his house, often recording their encounter with the great "Festus" Bailey in travel memoirs.

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