CHAPTER XIII

THE VICTORIAN SPASMODICS

LAST term I promised you a lecture upon those two minor schools of Victorian poets respectively called the Spasmodic and the Pre-Raphaelite. We shall begin to-day a short lecture on the Spasmodic school, which you know even less about than about the other. Already I have told you that the sarcastic term of "Spasmodic" must not be taken literally, that it was unjust, and that the school, although having no great sustained force, did some good work and must not be despised. Some of the best examples of that work have found their way into the best collections of Victorian poems, which is proof positive that the school has merit. If it could not live — that was only because its keynote was strong emotion, and you cannot keep up such a tone indefinitely. The school exhausted itself at an early day.

I am not quite sure of being able to define for you accurately by any list of names, the composition of that school. Many who did work for it cannot be said to have belonged to it for more than a very short time. Without any doubt I should have to put Miss Barrett (Mrs. Browning) into that school, and yet she occasionally rose above it. I should have to put Owen Meredith into the same class, for example—and Owen Meredith nevertheless worked in an entirely different direction. Alexander Smith has been called one of the Spasmodics; but I can show you some of his work that is scarcely inferior to corresponding work of Tennyson's. And then there is James Thomson, the greatest of English pessimistic poets, the only man in English literature whom we can fairly compare with the Italian Giacomo

Leopardi. I think you have heard of Leopardi as particularly famous among pessimistic poets; but I think that Thomson, in spite of his want of education, is much more remarkable for the force of his pessimism than the delicate Italian sufferer. Well, as I have said, Thomson has been called a Spasmodic; but there is a dignity and massive power in much of his work which cannot be called spasmodic at all. It would be truer to call it Miltonic.

In fact, we must consider that the appellation Spasmodic refers to the faults of the school. The meaning of the word "spasmodic" is, as I told you, excess of emotion wrought up to the point of morbidness or sickness. But this does not mean that emotion is to be condemned because it is too strong. On the contrary such emotionalism, in real life, indicates weakness, sickness, disease of the nerves, loss of will power. An emotion cannot be too strong for artistic use; see the tremendous and terrible display of passion in Shakespeare's plays, incomparably stronger than anything in the Spasmodic school of poetry. But such passions, when artistically expressed, come like sudden storms and as quickly pass; for they are the passions of powerful and healthy men and women. Not so in the case of sickly or mawkish feeling; that is long-drawn and wearisome like the crying of a fretful child, or like the complaining of a sick man whose nerves are out of order. In the case of a child crying for a good reason, we are all sorry, and we do our best to comfort the child; but if the child continues to cry long after the pain is over, we become tired, and think that it looks very ugly as it cries. And if the child persists in crying for another half hour, we suspect a malicious intention and become angry with the child. Now the Spasmodic poets make us angry in exactly the same way; they cry without reason. There is a temptation to do the same thing in the case of almost all young students who have the two gifts of poetical sensibility and imagination; when they begin to treat of a pathetic subject, they are very likely to become too pathetic. That is partly because they are young,

and have not yet had time to learn the literary secret that emotion must be compressed like air to serve an artistic object. You know that the more you can compress the air the more powerful it becomes, and in mechanics, compressed air is one of the great motive forces. Emotion in literature is, in exactly the same way, a motive force; but you must compress it to get the power. This the poets of the Spasmodic school refuse to do.

Nevertheless they obtained immediate, though brief, popularity—which encouraged them to cry still louder than before. But why? Simply because to persons of uncultured taste the higher zones of emotion are out of reach. Their nerves are somewhat dull; they are moved by very simple things, and would not be moved at all perhaps by great things. Everywhere there is a public of this kind, to whom lachrymose emotion and mawkish sentiment give the same kind of pleasure that black, red and blazing yellow give to the eyes of little children and savages. In England this public is particularly large. But after all, it is capable of learning, and it gets tired at last of what is not good, just as an intelligent child is able to learn, after a time, that certain colours are vulgar and others gentle. When the English public learned the faults of what they were admiring, they dropped the Spasmodics and forgot their beauties as well as their faults. But there are beauties which ought not to be forgotten; and some of these are to be found in the work of Sydney Dobell.

Sydney Dobell was the son of a wine merchant, and himself became a wine dealer, which he remained during the greater part of his life. He was well educated, and with a better conception of art might have done very good things. As it is, nobody can read the whole of his poetry without disliking him; it is too mawkish. This was not the result of bad training. It was the expression of a belief prevalent in certain literary circles of the time, that Tennyson and his followers were too cold, and that a more emotional school of poetry was needed. The Pre-Raphaelite

circle had the same opinion. The opinion was right. But while the Pre-Raphaelite went to work in the right direction to improve upon the methods of the earlier Romantics, the Spasmodics went to work in the wrong direction. They exaggerated pathos without perceiving that the more room given to it, the weaker it becomes. Nevertheless, before they failed they succeeded in giving a few beautiful things to English anthologies; and several of these are by Dobell.

Out of the mass of Dobell's work I think that there are really only three first class pieces, although the new Oxford anthology makes a different choice. I have no alternative but to exercise my own judgment; and I give the preference to the pieces entitled, "Tommy's Dead," "How's My Boy?" and the queer little ballad said to have inspired the refrain of Rossetti's wonderful "Sister Helen."

I shall first quote from "Tommy's Dead." This poem represents the grief of a father for the loss of his favourite son. The father is a farmer, a very old man, and weak in his mind. All the poem I shall not quote; it has the fault of being very much too long. But the best parts of it are powerful and striking.

> You may give over plough, boys,
> You may take the gear to the stead,
> All the sweat o' your brow, boys,
> Will never get beer and bread.
> The seed's waste, I know, boys,
> There's not a blade will grow, boys,
> 'Tis cropp'd out, I trow, boys,
> And Tommy's dead.

So the poem opens. The old man is working in the field with his sons, and suddenly hearing the news of the death of his favourite, is filled with despair. It seems to him that life is not worth living, that it is quite useless to work any more, that everything is all wrong in the world. He wants his sons to sell the spare horse; he thinks the cow will die; he wants the hired men and women paid off and sent away. Evidently he is becoming crazed. In the fourth

stanza the fact appears without any question, for he begins to talk to the ghost of his long dead daughter whom he thinks he sees standing in the middle of the floor. Then visions come thick before him, and in the fifth section of the poem these visions are described in a manner not to be easily forgotten. All the strength of the poem is here:

> There's something not right, boys,
> But I think it's not in my head,
> I've kept my precious sight, boys—
> The Lord be hallowed!
> Outside and in
> The ground is cold to my tread,
> The hills are wizen and thin,
> The sky is shrivell'd and shred,
> The hedges down by the loan
> I can count them bone by bone,
> The leaves are open and spread,
> But I see the teeth of the land,
> And hands like a dead man's hand,
> And the eyes of a dead man's head.
> There's nothing but cinders and sand,
> The rat and the mouse have fed,
> And the summer's empty and cold;
> O'er valley and wold
> Wherever I turn my head
> There's a mildew and a mould,
> The sun's going out overhead,
> And I'm very old,
> And Tommy's dead!

The most powerful line in this quotation is about the "teeth of the land." One never forgets that after reading the poem. It is a scriptural idea; the old farmer remembers his Bible and the words of the old Hebrew prophets about the land that devours nations. Only, in his weakness and half madness these memories of the Bible take strange shapes in his old brain and inspire horrible fancies. Now the land seems to him a vast skull, the corpse of something, noseless and eyeless and cheekless, showing its hideous

teeth. Even the forms of the trees become skeletons to his fancy, and the branches are bones. Notice that the choice of words in these lines is very fine, and very successful in giving the weird impression desired. I refer particularly to the words "wizen" and "thin," as applied to the fancied appearance of the sky. And after this the poem goes on one, two, three, four, five and six weary stanzas, any one of which could be spared. If the poet had stopped at the part where I have stopped, the poem would have lost nothing. For nothing could be more pathetic, more weird, more terrible than the vision of the changed world to the eyes of the despairing father; and anything added thereafter can only weaken the force of what has gone before.

The same fault exists to a less degree in the piece entitled "How's My Boy?" The questioner is the mother, who has been made insane by the loss of her sailor son. She cannot understand that he is dead; whenever a ship comes into the harbour, she runs down to ask the sailors for her boy. Most of them know her, and answer her fitly and kindly; but one day a strange ship comes, and she happens to question a man who does not know her story.

"Ho, sailor of the sea!
How's my boy—my boy?"
"What's your boy's name, good wife,
And in what good ship sail'd he?"
"My boy John —
He that went to sea —
What care I for the ship, sailor?
My boy's my boy to me.
You come back from sea,
And not know my John?
I might as well have ask'd some landsman
Yonder down in the town.
There's not an ass in all the parish
But he knows my John."

And she begins to reproach him in a loud voice for not knowing her son. "But, my good woman," he says, "how

can I answer you unless you tell me the name of the ship"? After a long time she tells him that his ship was called *The Jolly Briton.* He tells her not to talk so loud—

"Speak low, woman, speak low!"
"And why should I speak low, sailor,
About my own boy John?
If I was loud as I am proud
I'd sing him over the town,
Why should I speak low, sailor?"
"That good ship went down."

"How's my boy,—my boy?
What care I for the ship, sailor?
I was never aboard her.
Be she afloat or be she aground,
Sinking or swimming, I'll be bound,
Her owners can afford her!
I say, How's my John?"
"Every man on board went down,
Every man aboard her."
"How's my boy,—my boy?
What care I for the men, sailor?
I'm not their mother—
How's my boy,—my boy?
Tell me of him and no other!
How's my boy,—my boy?"

This is a strong feat, and deserves its place in an anthology. The power of it depends better upon the reading —you must know where to place the accents. If a skilful reader recites this piece, the pathos of it becomes almost terrible. Still, it might have been shortened with good effect; there are at least half a dozen superfluous lines and a number of useless repetitions. I shall not quote "The Ballad of Keith of Ravelston"—you will find it in Palgrave's Anthology, if you wish to read it, and it falls a little short of being great. The quotations which I have given will explain to you the method of Sydney Dobell. He generally

takes a death bed scene or a tragedy of some kind, and heaps up the sorrow at wearisome length. What I have given you represents his very best.

But the best of Alexander Smith is much greater than this. Alexander Smith was at one time thought to be almost as great as Tennyson — which was a mistake. He was not a fortunate man, and became an author almost by accident. He was a pattern designer in Glasgow, where he composed his first poems, and these immediately attracted attention to him. Friends procured him the position of secretary to the University of Edinburgh, a position which he held until his death. He died quite young, of consumption. Perhaps his long painful illness prevented him from becoming great. Whatever harsh criticisms have been made upon the faults of Alexander Smith, I am quite sure of one thing,—that he actually wrote one poem well worthy to be compared with Tennyson's lyrical splendour. The subject of the poem is the city of Glasgow. Reading this superb composition, one cannot help strongly regretting the early death of the mind capable of composing it. It is an unforgettable poem; and it expresses the terrors and gloom and grandeur of a great manufacturing city better than any other poem in the English language.

Sing, Poet, 'tis a merry world;
That cottage smoke is rolled and curled
    In sport, that every moss
Is happy, every inch of soil; —
Before me runs a road of toil
    With my grave cut across.
Sing, trailing showers and breezy downs, —
I know the tragic hearts of towns.

City! I am true son of thine;
Ne'er dwelt I where great mornings shine
    Around the bleating pens;
Ne'er by the rivulets I strayed,
And ne'er upon my childhood weighed
    The silence of the glens.

Instead of shores where ocean beats,
I hear the ebb and flow of streets.

Black Labour draws his weary waves
Into their secret-moaning caves;
    But with the morning light
That sea again will overflow
With a long, weary sound of woe,
    Again to faint in night.
Wave am I in that sea of woes,
Which, night and morning, ebbs and flows.

This fine introduction promises well, and you will find that the promise is fulfilled. The poet intends to tell us about the sorrow and pain of city life, as experienced by himself. He does not know much about the country, but he speaks with mockery of the poet who talks about the beautiful smoke rising up from the cottage of poor country labourers, as if the labourers had nothing to do but to enjoy themselves — he laughs at the poets of Nature, who talk about birds and flowers and trees as supremely happy. For his knowledge of towns has taught him the law of life, which is Pain; and he knows that all living creatures must toil and suffer while they live. How very fine is that likening of his own life-path to a long road ending in a grave!

To him the life of a great city is like a sea, — a black sea of pain, in which every individual is but a wave. Every morning the tide of that sea rises, as the myriads go forth from their homes to toil; in the evening that tide ebbs, as the myriads return to their houses. This simile is very grand, but you cannot understand how grand it is until you know the gloom and thunder and sorrow of a great Western city. You cannot imagine it from anything that you have seen in Japan. Here, in our great city, all is light and sun, and there are trees in the streets, and gardens about the houses; and the country is so near you that you can walk out to the fields any afternoon. But in a great

manufacturing city like Glasgow, the streets are mountains of masonry, blackened with the smoke of factories, and between the cliffs of the gloomy houses the thronging of the life of the place is like the rushing of a river, with ceaseless rollings of thunder. In any great manufacturing town (above all, in London, the most awful city upon earth) there is a regular rising and falling of the roar of its life in the morning and in the evening, like the sound of a tide, indeed, when heard far away. So, as I said, I do not think that you can feel the great power of the third stanza, unless you have seen and felt what the poet had seen and felt. In a city like that, a man who thinks introspectingly cannot help feeling how very small he is, how very slight his relation to the monstrous existence of the city itself. He is only like one ripple in a mighty current, one wave in the tide of the sea. And in those dark cities the real joys of bright skies and green fields and blossoming trees are scarcely known, even to the rich. Of course there are green fields in the country, but the country is very far away; you can only go to it by railway when you happen to have a holiday, which is not often. There are things called gardens, but the walls about them are so high that the sunshine cannot reach the flowers there.

I dwelt within a gloomy court,
Wherein did never sunbeam sport;
    Yet there my heart was stirred,—
My very blood did dance and thrill,
When on my narrow window-sill
    Spring lighted like a bird.
Poor flowers! I watched them pine for weeks,
With leaves as pale as human cheeks.

That is to say, as the cheeks of dwellers in such cities, who are proverbially pale. There is no exaggeration in this verse; it is actually true that the leaves of the trees in such city courts and gardens become unnaturally pale for want of fresh air and sun. The verse relates to the poet's child-

hood. But later on he did have a short holiday in the country; he saw the sea and he saw the mountains, and the memory of that happy day remains with him all his life:

Afar, one summer, I was borne;
Through golden vapours of the morn
I heard the hills of sheep:
I trod with a wild ecstasy
The bright fringe of the living sea:
And on a ruined keep
I sat and watched an endless plain
Blackened beneath the gloom of rain.

O, fair the lightly sprinkled waste,
O'er which a laughing shower has raced!
O fair the April shoots!
O, fair the woods on summer days,
While a blue hyacinthine haze
Is dreaming round the roots!
In thee, O city! I discern
Another beauty, sad and stern.

The scenery described is near Glasgow, apparently — a mountain region by the sea, where sheep are herded, and where there is the ruin of an ancient castle. To ascend to the top of the tower and from there to watch a rain shower pass over the plain below, is a very delightful experience for a child. As for the word "hyacinth," I think you have noticed, in the time of spring vapours, that the shadows of the woods seem at a distance to look blue, and that the dark spaces between the trunks seem to be filled with deep-blue mists. The beauty of the expression "dreaming," I need not explain. Beautiful was this experience of mountain and of sea to the city-dweller. And yet he thinks that the city is beautiful too—though beautiful in another way, with a sad and terrible beauty. To understand some of the parts of what follow you should remember that Glasgow is one of the centres of the great ship-building industry.

Draw thy fierce streams of blinding ore,
Smite on a thousand anvils, roar
    Down to the harbour-bars;
Smoulder in smoky sunsets, flare
On rainy nights, while street and square
    Lie empty to the stars.
From terrace proud to alley base,
I know thee as my mother's face.

When sunset bathes thee in his gold,
In wreaths of bronze thy sides are rolled,
    Thy smoke is dusty fire;
And from the glory round thee poured,
A sunbeam like an angel's sword
    Shivers upon a spire.
Thus have I watched thee, Terror! Dream!
While the blue Night crept up the stream.

The wild train plunges in the hills,
He shrieks across the midnight rills;
    Steams through the shifting glare,
The roar and flap of foundry fires,
That shake with light the sleeping shires;
    And on the moorlands bare
He sees afar a crown of light
Hang o'er thee in the hollow night.

At midnight, when thy suburbs lie
As silent as a noonday sky
    When larks with heat are mute,
I love to linger on thy bridge,
All lonely as a mountain ridge,
    Disturbed but by my foot;
While the black lazy stream beneath
Steals from its far-off wilds of heath.

Have you ever noticed, in the neighbourhood of some great factory, the effect of sunlight upon the smoky air? I am not sure whether you can see anywhere in Japan what is described in these lines, to the same degree; but perhaps you have noticed that sunlight in smoky air, especially at

sunset time, takes colours of bronze and metals. The effect of sunset over a great smoky city like Glasgow is, at times, tremendous; the unnaturalness and grimness of the colours have indeed a particular splendour, but it is an infernal or awful splendour. In one of the stanzas notice the excellent use of the verb "flap" in describing the motion of great sheets of fire. The description of the light reflected skyward by a city at night you will be able to appreciate.

All these sights of the city at sunrise, at noon-day, at sunset, and at night, are dear to the city-dweller, because they are a part of his every-day existence. Also he loves the sight of the harbour with its myriads of masts, thick as pines in a forest. I need not, however, quote all the poem to you — only the best part of it. Well, as we have seen, he finds some beauty in the city—a beauty that prevents him from regretting the country too much. But there was a time when he wished very, very much to go and live in the country. Not for his own sake alone, but especially for the sake of another person. He dreamed of a cottage near to the sea, somewhere upon the beautiful hills. But all that wishing is past; it was only a dream. He is going to tell us why:

Afar the banner of the year
Unfurls; but dimly prisoned here,
    'Tis only when I greet
A dropt rose lying in my way,
A butterfly that flutters gay
    Athwart the noisy street,
I know the happy Summer smiles
Around thy suburbs, miles on miles.

'Twere neither pæan now, nor dirge,
The flash and thunder of the surge
    On flat sands wide and bare:
No haunting joy or anguish dwells,
In the green light of sunny dells,
    Or in the starry air.

Alike to me the desert flower,
The rainbow laughing o'er the shower.

While o'er thy walls the darkness sails,
I lean against the churchyard rails;
Up in the midnight towers
The belfried spire, the street is dead,
I hear in silence overhead
The clang of iron hours:
It moves me not,—I know her tomb
Is yonder in the shapeless gloom.

There is the real secret of his love for the city; the tomb of the woman to whom he had been betrothed is in the heart of it. For her it was that he, in other days, had longed for the sea, the bright woods, the windy hills. But now what does he care for the sea or the flowers? Alone, what happiness could the country give him? Please observe the great force and beauty of those three lines describing the bursting of waves upon a beach. The word "pæan," I think you know, meant a Greek hymn of joy or thanksgiving. What the poet means is that there are two aspects of the splendour of the sea, one joyous, the other melancholy, but that neither of these aspects could any longer interest him. All the memories and joys and pains of his life attach him to the city, and it is now, for these reasons, the only deep pleasure in the world. He thus addresses it:

All raptures of this mortal breath,
Solemnities of life and death,
Dwell in thy noise alone:
Of me thou hast become a part,—
Some kindred with my human heart
Lives in thy streets of stone;
For we have been familiar more
Than galley-slave and weary oar.

The beech is dipped in wine; the shower
Is burnished; on the swinging flower
The latest bee doth sit.

The low sun stares through dust of gold,
And o'er the darkening heath and wold
The large ghost-moth doth flit.
In every orchard Autumn stands,
With apples in his golden hands.

But all the sights and sounds are strange;
Then wherefore from thee should I range?
Thou hast my kith and kin;
My childhood, youth, and manhood brave;
Thou hast that unforgotten grave
Within thy central din.
A sacredness of love and death
Dwells in thy noise and smoky breath.

No man has ever more deeply expressed the emotion of love for his native city. A few expressions may need explanation—for example, the term "galley-slave." You know that ancient ships were moved not only with sails but with oars—indeed, up to the seventeenth century such oar ships were still in use. The Northern race, better seamen, discarded them at a much earlier date. The Greeks and Romans were first to use them on a large scale in war, and ships of war moved with oars were called war-galleys. Afterwards, in more modern times, as free men could not be readily induced to row such great ships, criminals were employed for such work—considered the most terrible work which a man could be obliged to do. Men were condemned to "the galleys" just as they are now condemned to prison for life. Thus "galley-slave" passed into colloquial speech as a symbolic term for anybody obliged to work very hard every day at the same thing, without hope of respite. In modern English stories, even of the present time, we often find clerks who are obliged to work very hard calling themselves galley-slaves. And here the poet speaks of his city as a galley, in which he is obliged to row very hard every day; but it is his home, and in spite of the hard work he loves it so much that he cannot bear to think of going away from it.

The second of the three stanzas above quoted begins with a rather difficult line, "The beech is dipped in wine." You must understand this to mean, "The beech tree, standing in the rich yellow light of the autumn sun, looks as if it had been dipped in yellow wine." "The shower is burnished" means simply, "The rain, as it falls against the sunset light, glitters like a shower of gold." These are the only difficulties. Perhaps you have never seen the word "ghost-moth" in English before. I believe that several kinds of insects are called by this name; but I imagine that the poet refers to what is more usually called "the death's-head moth"—that is, the skull-moth, because on the back of the creature there is distinctly marked the form of a skull. It is a large moth, and has the curious habit of stealing honey from bees. There are several curious superstitions connected with it. The poet mentions it merely because it is particularly an autumn insect. What he means to say is that now in the country all things are particularly beautiful to see. It is harvest time; the fields are full of ripe grain, the orchards are full of fruits, the hives are full of honey, and the honey-stealing moth has begun to fly abroad. I believe that this is the best example I could give you of Alexander Smith. All his work is not to be judged by the excellence of this single example; but it exemplifies the best of his powers, so prematurely numbed by death.

I shall now turn to the work of Arthur O'Shaughnessy, who but partly belongs to the group. He is not always a Spasmodic, but he is always a Rhapsodist, and this is the best time and place in which to quote from him. He was, during most of his life, a clerk in the British Museum — at first only an assistant librarian, later an assistant in the department of natural history. Like all the members of this school he was nervous, sensitive, sickly, and to a great extent unhappy. He sang of his own pains, mostly; and like James Thomson, he sang best when he was most unhappy. I need not quote his best piece, "The Silences," because I had occasion to cite it in another lecture. I am

going to give quotations from here and there, which will show you the original and rather strange beauty of his verse. Of other examples you will find a large number in Palgrave's Anthology.

The influence of Swinburne is especially noticeable in O'Shaughnessy, as it is noticeable in the work of Lord De Tabley; but O'Shaughnessy, like De Tabley, did not merely imitate Swinburne. He only felt him, absorbing something of his lyrical splendour and triumph to express it in new forms of verse. He was not so much a scholar as Lord De Tabley, but he had more original imagination, and could produce remarkable effects by very simple touches. Also, there can be no question as to the beauty of his melody; he had the "musical ear." Here is an example of his style, the first stanza of the poem entitled "In Love's Eternity":

> My body was part of the sun and the dew,
> Not a trace of my death to me clave,
> There was scarce a man left on the earth whom I knew,
> And another was laid in my grave.
> I was changed and in heaven, the great sea of blue
> Had long wash'd my soul pure in its wave.

The last two lines are surely very fine; translate them into Japanese, and the beauty will remain untouched. This is poetry that will bear any translation, even translation into prose, which is a very severe test. The poem goes on to describe an imaginary meeting in heaven with the woman that was vainly loved on earth. She explains all the sorrow of the past to him, and eternal happiness comes to both. Very much the same idea is expressed in another poem called "Greater Memory," but the art takes a different form, and the merit is even higher:

> In the heart there lay buried for years
> Love's story of passion and tears;
> Of the heaven that two had begun,
> And the horror that tore them apart,

When one was love's slayer, but one
Made a grave for the love in his heart.

The long years pass'd weary and lone,
And it lay there and changed there unknown;
Then one day from its innermost place,
In the shamed and the ruin'd love's stead,
Love arose with a glorified face,
Like an angel that comes from the dead.

The burial signifies here the real fact of death, so we must not take the heart to mean merely the heart of the flesh; it signifies here rather the mind. The man has died, but ages after, awakening into another life he remembers the woman he vainly loved, and meets her again, and forgets all the sorrow.

It was knowledge of all that had been
In the thought, in the soul unseen;
'Twas the word which the lips could not say
To redeem and recover the past;
It was more than was taken away
Which the heart got back at the last.

The passion that lost its spell,
The rose that died where it fell,
The look that was look'd in vain,
The prayer that seem'd lost evermore,
They were found in the heart again,
With all that the heart would restore.

There is perhaps an echo of Browning here, from the magnificent verse of "Abt Vogler":

The high that proved too high,
The heroics for earth too hard,
The passion that left the ground,
To lose itself in the sky,
Are music sent up to God
By the lover and the bard:
Enough that he heard it once—
We shall hear it by and by.

But although O'Shaughnessy may have been inspired by these lines of Browning, there is an original soft weirdness about his own presentation of the idea which lifts him far above the plane of the mere imitator.

The greater part of his poetry is love poetry and poetry of regret. But he also has inspiration for other motives—a constant longing for tropical life, a vain desire to visit the land of eternal summer. Perhaps it is especially in the gloom of London and the black damp of November fogs that a poet dreams of azure islands and impossible forests of palm trees. He has several poems of a remarkable kind upon these subjects. The best is the poem on palms, from which I may quote a stanza or two:

Mighty, luminous, and calm
Is the country of the palm,
    Crown'd with sunset and sunrise,
    Under blue unbroken skies,
Waving from green zone to zone,
Over wonders of its own;
Trackless, untraversed, unknown,
    Changeless through the centuries.
. . . . .

Long red reaches of the cane,
Yellow winding water-lane,
    Verdant isle and amber river,
Lisp and murmur back again,
    And ripe under-worlds deliver
Rapturous souls of perfume, hurl'd
    Up to where green oceans quiver
In the wide leaves' restless world.

Many thousand years have been,
And the sun alone hath seen,
    Like a high and radiant ocean,
    All the fair palm world in motion;
But the crimson bird hath fed
With its mate of equal red,
    And the flower in soft explosion
With the flower hath been wed.

This is music and colour indeed, and most picturesque fancy. The last two lines of the quotation have been justly admired by naturalists for the exquisite use of the phrase "soft explosion" to describe the ripening and bursting of the male flower scattering its fertilizing dust upon the beautiful blossom. But I must warn you that the rest of the description is all fairyland. O'Shaughnessy never saw the tropics, and there does not exist in the tropical zone any such world of palms as he describes. Palms have to struggle very hard for existence against a thousand other kinds of tree in the vast forests of the tropics. Sometimes we may find in the midst of the forest a successful colony of palms, and they are then worth seeing, for in order to reach the sun at all they must lift their heads more than two hundred feet through the dense vegetation. A world of palms, a whole forest of wild palm trees, is an utter impossibility; every palm tree must fight very hard for a chance to live at all. You can find woods of palm trees in some parts of the tropics, but they have been made by man, not by nature. The excellence of the poem is not in describing what is true, but only in describing the beautiful imagination of the writer.

One more of O'Shaughnessy's poems deserves attention in the course of this lecture, the piece entitled "The Fountain of Tears." It is in one way, indeed, a typical poem of this school; it pushes the emotion to the extreme of rhapsody. But it has sweet music, and the fancy is so uniquely expressed as to give it a peculiar imaginative charm. I need not quote any of the verses to you, because you will find the poem in the second series of Palgrave's Anthology. The fancy is that of a spring, in some retired place, made by all the tears of mankind. I think you know that this imagination is by no means new. In many mythologies there is mentioned such a river or lake of tears. The Breton fishermen have a proverb that the tears of women made the sea salt. In Japanese folklore also you have the river of tears. There is poetry in all these fancies,

true poetry; they oblige us to reflect for a moment on the mass of human suffering. As I said, the fancy is not new, but I doubt whether it will ever become commonplace. In O'Shaughnessy's poem, the spring of tears at first appears to well up very gently and softly, with a music in its flowing that brings a strange kind of consolation to the hearer. But gradually the stream becomes strong, the ripples change to waves, the waves to billowings, and at last the flowing threatens to drown the world. So the imagination is carried almost to the edge of the grotesque. It is one of those compositions which come very close to the merely nonsensical, and yet remain beautiful in a certain way. One test of the value of a poem of this kind is the depth of the impression that it makes on the memory. Now, whoever reads this piece will never forget it, whether he likes it or not; and that is tolerably good proof that it is above the common.

Here I may close the subject of the Spasmodic poets. I have tried to show you that some of them produced beautiful things; and I think they have been somewhat unjustly judged. You must remember that these men, fighting for the expression of sincere emotion in literature, were themselves nearly all weak men, sick men, unhappy men; and many of their mistakes must have been due to nervous conditions. All the more do they deserve credit for having been able to add something to the treasure-house of English poetry, especially something of a new kind.

Do not, at the same time, forget that their principal weakness constitutes a literary object lesson. To dwell upon an emotion at an unnecessary length is always dangerous. Sustained feeling is not at all likely to be powerful. The most powerful emotional poems are not those in which the sentiment is expressed in many stanzas or in many lines. I want now to give you, in contrast to the work of the real Spasmodics, one example of what I call a powerful poem. I do not know who wrote it; neither does anybody else. I found it the other day in the recent Oxford An-

thology. It is a religious poem, a prayer. You know that I have not much liking for religious poetry in general, and little sympathy with most forms of religious emotion. Nevertheless I do not hesitate to say that I think this one of the strongest poems of an emotional kind that I have ever seen. It is simply entitled "Non Nobis,"—words taken from the old Latin version of the first verse of the hundred and fifteenth psalm, commencing "Not unto us, O Lord."

Not unto us, O Lord,
Not unto us the rapture of the day,
The peace of night, or love's divine surprise,
High heart, high speech, high deeds 'mid honouring eyes;
For at Thy word
All these are taken away.

Not unto us, O Lord:
To us thou givest the scorn, the scourge, the scar,
The ache of life, the loneliness of death,
The insufferable sufficiency of breath;
And with Thy sword
Thou piercest very far.

Not unto us, O Lord:
Nay, Lord, but unto her be all things given—
My light and life and earth and sky be blasted—
But let not all that wealth of love be wasted:
Let Hell afford
The pavement of her Heaven!

"This is only a Christian prayer," perhaps you were beginning to think — "there is nothing remarkable in it — except the fine, strong, sonorous verse." But the surprise comes with the third stanza. This sudden focussing of religious emotion upon the object of human love seems to me one of the noblest and strongest poetical efforts that I have ever read. Observe, also, that the character of this love is not otherwise indicated than by its intensity. Is it the mother, the sister, or the wife, of whom he is thinking?

We do not know; we cannot even guess. All we hear is the passionate expression of love for the woman who believes the man to be better than he really is. He knows himself not good, knows he deserves no favour, no mercy from Heaven. There is but one thing that he feels not afraid to pray for. He dares not pray for himself, but this mother, or wife, or sister who loves him — how horrible would it be that she should find at some future time all her love lost, wasted upon an unworthy object! Therefore — and only therefore — he prays that "Hell may afford the pavement of her Heaven"—that is to say, that what should be in Hell might at least be spared to form the pavement of that Heaven upon which the feet of the woman he loved must tread. Every time you read that poem over, the stronger it becomes. How different is this from merely sentimental and mawkish poetry! This is power.