

# The Limits of Gore and Sympathy in Pacific Poetry: Southey and Hunt against an Augustan Tradition

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## Biography

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## Abstract

The shock, horror, sentimentalism, and sympathy evoked by images, verbal or visual, of war fail to produce a meaningful discourse against war because they participate in a symbolic logic not only entrenched in war, but also celebrated by patriots for war.

## Résumé

Le choc, l'horreur, l'émotion et la compassion provoquées par des images qu'elles soient verbales ou visuelles sont incapables de générer un discours argumenté contre la guerre car les images participent tout autant de la représentation des réalités de la guerre que de la célébration du patriotisme guerrier.

## Keywords

Leigh Hunt, *Captain Sword and Captain Pen* (1835), Robert Southey, "The Battle of Blenheim" (1774-1843), Jeremy Bentham, Alexander Pope, James MacPherson, Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (1985), Battle of Blenheim (1704), Vienna, Joseph Addison, Susan Stewart, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Thomas Carlyle, Heroism, Virgil, Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne, Helen Maria Williams, Isaac Watts, Susan Sontag, Susan Stewart, *The Stuffed Owl* (1930).

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Vivid descriptions of the miseries of war are of limited use to an anti-war discourse. In *Captain Sword and Captain Pen* (1835), Leigh Hunt (with Robert Southey and Jeremy Bentham behind him) predicates his poetic strategy on the notion that historically writers have failed to portray the grotesque realities of the battlefield. If only readers knew, were forced to imagine, such brutality, they would cease to wage wars. But as Elaine Scarry explains in *The Body in Pain* (1985), war's meaning inheres in, and has yet to be replaced by anything other than, the mangling of bodies. Southey's "The Battle of Blenheim" pretends that the found skull turned innocent's plaything signifies the emptiness of war; but the truth is the battle has meaning precisely because the rolling head is there. So far from being shocking, Hunt's and Southey's descriptions merely participate in a symbolic logic not only entrenched in war but celebrated by patriots for war. And writers have traditionally been very graphic (if often stylized) in their depictions of war. Though the Homeric tradition of gore was somewhat cleansed by Alexander Pope and James MacPherson (the latter of whose poetry nevertheless conveys again and again the heroic virtue of single combat), still plenty of poets (among them Joseph Addison) envisage heaps on heaps of mangled bodies when celebrating British heroes. What seems a simple strategy—evoking horror to produce a sympathetic reader open to pacific ideals—will thus prove difficult in implementation, not least because, as the second part of this essay will show, sympathy is as unstable a device as gore is an image.

### **I. The Limits of Gore as Pacific Image**

Susan Stewart has argued that lyric counters epic as the particular counters the general, the personal counters the national, the physical counters the sublime, and Marx counters Kant. Moreover, Stewart suggests that literature may be a vehicle for moral progress, but only insofar as the lyric is able to relate individuality more powerfully than the epic promotes abstraction (Stewart 2002, 293-325). Attractive though it may be, Stewart's faith in the lyric ignores many problems. Her sense of individuality, for one, seems to mean something like an un-alienated relation to a reader of a particular person's experience of his or her own sensual world. Even if one's experience could be related directly, which of course it cannot since it must be mediated through language, that very recording of experience would be problematized by having its roots in the very Enlightenment project (that is, empiricism and sentimentalism) that Stewart dismisses as a reification of national culture. One need only watch Passolini's *Salo* for five minutes to witness the dangers of espousing the absolute moral good of individual passion. That said, it may be true, or at least useful to consider that, as Jacqueline Rose has written, the waging of war may be a psychic attack on the self (Rose 1993). Encountering the self may indeed be a way to put a halt to harming others. Rather than push this point, Stewart switches terms and suggests that it is when the speaker of a poem, and the reader as well, can imagine the enemy "as a kind of brother, [that] the epic-heroic code of conduct

and its dependence on the manufacture of abstractions are blocked” (300). Arguing this in the context of Whitman’s *Drum-taps*, a book attracted to war more than she may notice, Stewart forgets that the Civil War relentlessly pitted brother against brother.

Is the first-person or any direct account of war able to undo the ideology of war? Can anti-war discourse achieve its goal (peace, or merely the cessation of war?) simply by offering the sounds, smells and tastes of the battlefield in as much detail as possible? Though Stewart mentions them only to call attention to their generic attenuation, the late-eighteenth-century and Romantic epic first tries to answer these questions by suggesting that poets write more vividly of the horrors of war. In so doing, they discover for readers the limits of description in undermining war.

In the postscript to *Captain Sword and Captain Pen*, Leigh Hunt announces that the time has come to:

tear asunder the veil from the sore places of war...for putting an end to those phrases in the narratives of warfare, by which a suspicious delicacy is palmed upon the reader, who is told, after everything has been done to excite his admiration of war, that his feelings are ‘spared’ a recital of its miseries—that ‘a veil’ is drawn over them—a ‘truce’ given to descriptions which only ‘harrow up the soul’...Is a murder in the streets worth attending to...and are all the murders, and massacres, and fields of wounded, and the madness, the conflagrations, the famines, the miseries of families, and the rickety frames and melancholy bloods of posterity, only fit to have an embroidered handkerchief thrown over them? (50-51)

Should people continue choosing to wage and participate in war, at the very least they ought to go in comprehending fully the destruction that will ensue, and the personal harm to which they will put themselves at risk. That this is not the condition under which people volunteer (if they have the chance even for that) implies a willful cover-up on the part of leaders who not only ask but encourage (“excite”) others to fight. And so, anticipating Nietzsche’s attack on sentimentalism, Hunt tears away the veil of patriotic duty that encourages young men to seek glory while hiding the brutal realities of war. He does this in two ways, the first stylistically, the second narratively.

As to the first, Hunt depicts (with an ironic use of trotting iambic tetrameter) the gruesomeness not only of battle (“Down go bodies, snap burst eyes; / Trod on the ground are tender cries; / Brains are dash’d against plashing ears” [7]), but of what occurs on the field the night after a victor has been established. The latter occurs in the fourth section of the poem, in which after showing two women talking hopefully about a soldier (the son of one, the fiancé of the other), Hunt cuts to the battlefield for the reader to witness the very same man dying of thirst; and shortly afterwards makes the reader imagine a soldier

burned in a grass fire whose only hope is that robbers may discover him and put an end to his suffering. In the postscript Hunt reveals the purpose of such imagery, which is, in lieu of abolishing war, to meliorate the conditions of soldiers following the cessation of battle:

Even if nothing else were to come of inquiries into the horrors of war, surely they would cry aloud for some better provision against their extremity *after* battle,—for some regulated and certain assistance to the wounded and agonized,—so that we might hear no longer of men left in cold and misery all night, writhing with torture,—of bodies stripped by prowlers, perhaps murderers,—and of frenzied men, the other day the darlings of their friends, dying, two and even several days after the battle, of famine! The field of Waterloo was not completely cleared of its dead and dying till nearly a week! (52)

Ultimately these images are meant to provoke the reader to wonder if there is another way. The narrative offers an answer. For when Captain Pen finally brings down Captain Sword, who after five sections of the poem has gone mad with power and reincarnated himself first as Napoleon and then Wellington, he does so not with arms but a printing press. If war is about the engagement of cultures then it can be fought by debating ideas and winning minds, rather than killing. (This is an idealism shared by Shelley's *Laon and Cythna* and "Mask of Anarchy.") Where the sword smites all ideas but one, the printing press can transmit ideas ad infinitum. Hunt's poem therefore represents the opening salvo described at its own conclusion.

The postscript serves as a second wave, not only by explicating Hunt's own text, but by deploying references to four other writers and thereby enacting its strategy of proliferating ideas. Two of the quotations echo Hunt's thematic proposal that wars of ideas rather than weapons be waged. On this Hunt quotes Thomas Carlyle from an entry in the *Edinburgh Review* (March 1831), in which the critic exalts the intellect as the saving force in human existence (99-102), and Sir Francis Head's *Bubbles from the Brunnens of Nassau*, in which the author tells of a chance meeting with the Emperor of Russia and in so narrating decries war in favor of educating the masses by means of the press (102-110). The two other quotations echo Hunt's stylistic effort to shock the reader, and show that others were already critiquing the myth of heroism by focusing attention on local, vividly detailed suffering. One comes from Jeremy Bentham's *Deontology*:

Of all that is pernicious in admiration, the admiration of heroes is the most pernicious; and how delusion should have made us admire what virtue should teach us to hate and loathe, is among the saddest evidences of human weakness and folly...A lively idea of the mischief they do, of the misery they create, seldom

penetrates the mind through the delusions with which thoughtlessness and falsehood have surrounded their names and deeds. Is it that the magnitude of the evil is too gigantic for entrance? We read of twenty thousand men killed in a battle, with no other feeling than that 'it was a glorious victory.' Twenty thousand, or ten thousand, what reck we of their sufferings? The hosts who perished are evidence of the completeness of the triumph; and the completeness of the triumph is the measure of merit, and the glory of the conqueror. Our schoolmasters, and the immoral books they so often put into our hands, have inspired us with an affection for heroes; and the hero is more heroic in proportion to the numbers of the slain—add a cypher, not one iota is added to our disapprobation. Four or two figures give us no more sentiment of pain than one figure, while they add marvellously to the grandeur and splendour of the victor. Let us draw forth one individual from those thousands, or tens of thousands,—his leg has been shivered by one ball, his jaw broken by another—he is bathed in his own blood, and that of his fellows—yet he lives, tortured by thirst, fainting, famishing. He is but one of the twenty thousand—one of the actors and sufferers in the scene of the hero's glory—and of the twenty thousand there is scarcely one whose suffering or death will not be the centre of a circle of misery. Look again, admirers of that hero! Is not this wretchedness? Because it is repeated ten, ten hundred, ten thousand times, is not this wretchedness? (94-97)

Like Hunt, Bentham believes not only that the masses are mystified by the "glories" of heroes and the abstraction of large numbers but that the only way to demystify the staggering losses of war is to depict its gore. The same holds for Robert Southey, the second author cited for this purpose. Hunt quotes a lengthy footnote attached to the text of Southey's "To Horror," a curse poem aimed at conquerors and slave owners, wherein the poet first offers a "picture of consummate horror" taken from notes of a retreat to Deventer in 1794-1795 representing the wasting effect of war on domesticity:

We could not proceed a hundred yards without perceiving the dead bodies of men, women, children, and horses, in every direction. One scene made an impression upon my memory which time will never be able to efface. Near another cart we perceived a stout-looking man and a beautiful young woman, with an infant, about seven months old, at the breast, all three

frozen and dead. The mother had most certainly expired in the act of suckling her child; as with one breast exposed she lay upon the drifted snow, the milk to all appearance in a stream drawn from the nipple by the babe, and instantly congealed. The infant seemed as if its lips had but just then been disengaged, and it reposed its little head upon the mother's bosom, with an overflow of milk, frozen as it trickled from the mouth. Their countenances were perfectly composed and fresh, resembling those of persons in a sound and tranquil slumber. (55-56)

The man is still stout, the mother beautiful, and the infant just now sated with milk. The three figures form an ironic tableau vivant displaying more and less than a mirror image for the reader, for it is an absent presence, a composition of perfection few if any ever experience. It is the image of permanently suspended innocence, yet produced and contained by war, and beyond the experience of the reader in a warring world. Southey follows it with a more immediate description of the field of Jemappe after Dumouriez's victory there in 1792, quoted from an unattributed source:

The ground was ploughed up by the wheels of the artillery and wagons; everything like herbage was trodden into mire; broken carriages, arms, accoutrements, dead horses and men, were strewed over the heath. *This was the third day after the battle: it was the beginning of November, and for three days a bleak wind and heavy rain had continued incessantly...*I can speak with certainty of having seen more than four hundred men *still living*, unsheltered, *without food*, and without any human assistance, most of them confined to the spot where they had fallen *by broken limbs*. The two armies had proceeded, and abandoned these miserable wretches to their fate. *Some of the dead persons appeared to have expired in the act of embracing each other...*One very fine young man had just strength enough to drag himself out of a hollow partly filled with water, and was laid upon a little hillock groaning with agony; A GRAPE-SHOT HAD CUT ACROSS THE UPPER PART OF HIS BELLY, AND HE WAS KEEPING IN HIS BOWELS WITH A HANDKERCHIEF AND HAT. He begged of me to end his misery! He complained of a dreadful thirst. I filled him the hat of a dead soldier with water, which he nearly drank off at once, and left him to that end of his wretchedness which could not be far distant. (57-58)

Unquestionably, these passages, as well as those from Bentham and Hunt's poem, are evocative. But what precisely they evoke is more difficult to determine. If the domestic tableau strikes the reader as somehow unreal, might it be because its figures too are stylized? In the opening chapter of her famous essay *On Photography*, Susan Sontag suggests that photography's claims to truth demand resistance: "Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from *not* accepting the world as it looks. All possibility of understanding is rooted in the ability to say no." (Sontag 1990, 23) Poets are never quite able comfortably to posture that they have somehow captured the world as it appears, but even so Hunt's belief that realistic detail will shock readers into pacifism may be misdirected.

In the same chapter Sontag argues that "to photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed" (14). Though Southey means to write on their behalf his still of the frozen family may enact a second form of (albeit mild) violation on them, manipulating their lives so as to fit them under one grand rubric: the horrifying. In "The Battle of Blenheim," Southey actually performs the opposite act, denying meaning to war by emptying a body of substance and meaning (see Stallworthy 1984, 64-66). In "Blenheim," Old Kaspar's grandchild Peterkin finds and rolls an object towards his grandfather to ask him what it is. It is a skull, and the narrator's description of it as "so large, and smooth, and round" (line 12) highlights not only its hollowness but its lack of distinction—a point later emphasized when Kaspar indicates he has found many himself in the garden and while plowing his field. Hearing that the skull belonged to "some poor fellow" who fell "in the great victory," Peterkin and his sister Wilhelmine ask their grandfather to explain "what 'twas all about" (lines 18, 25). But Kaspar cannot offer a coherent narrative of Marlborough's greatest victory, much less the entire War of Spanish Succession; and when Peterkin finally asks what good finally came of the war Kaspar can only respond: "Why that I cannot tell... / But 'twas a famous victory" (lines 65-66). Here Bentham's incomprehensible cipher is transformed by Southey into an equally empty skull. The violation is easier to detect: the anonymous skull is denied identity and the acts as well as the death of this person are denied meaning to serve the poet's agenda. In essence, then, Southey works with extreme versions of dead bodies to fill or empty them with meaning that meets his political ends.

He does this perhaps in tacit awareness that, between the extremes, bodies do not in themselves represent anything stable. One of the reasons for this has to do with repetition. While Hunt apparently believes that multiplying his images by citing Bentham and Southey will add to the reader's shock, in fact the opposite may be true: the more readers are asked to imagine the horrors of war the less moved they will be. Again, this is a point addressed by Sontag in her work on photography: "Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more—and more. Images transfix. Images anesthetize. An event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have...But after repeated exposure to images it also becomes less real" (Sontag 1990, 20). After

September 11, 2001, Sontag returned to this point with a little less certainty in her essay *Regarding the Pain of Others*, suggesting that an “assault by images” may not numb the viewer and therefore may retain some ethical value (Sontag 2003, 116). This is true, however, only if the meaning of the images is stable, and clearly understood. Sontag recognizes this is rarely the case: “...the same antiwar photograph may be read as showing pathos, or heroism, admirable heroism in an unavoidable struggle that can be concluded only by victory or by defeat. The photographer’s intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it” (38-9). Where Southey wants his skull to be generic, another person, this time a believer in fighting for British liberty, for defending Britain and Europe against an encroaching France, might want to identify the skull as belonging to, if not a specific individual, at least a particular nation.

In fact, Southey’s rolling head found in a field is generic. It comes from a long literary tradition, and is an image as often used in rousing poems of war as in protestations for peace. The source is the end of Book I of *The Georgics*, when Virgil, pleading with Augustus to settle soldiers on farms and guide them away from destruction, imagines a future in which war has become an outdated relic, like a piece of armor buried in a field:

Surely a time will come when in those regions  
The farmer heaving the soil with his curved plough  
Will come on spears all eaten up with rust  
Or strike with his heavy hoe on hollow helmets,  
And gape at the huge bones in the upturned graves.  
(lines 493-497)<sup>1</sup>

No heroes are remembered, nor do any monuments memorialize the battle once fought on his farmer’s fields. Minimizing it to a few artifacts of a distant past it seems Virgil hopes to replace war—which is hollow, its ways rusted and past use—with agriculture and turn swords into pruning hooks. The epic imagery he uses throughout *The Georgics* to describe the husbandman’s labors is intended to create a new idea of heroism. Acts will be heroic that are productive, not destructive; and the only battles fought in the future will be waged against uncultivated lands, not humankind.

Yet these lines refer mainly to civil war, not imperial. Moreover, in eighteenth-century hands similar georgic landscapes could as likely be used to imagine war as peace, for the simple reason that georgic virtue was believed capable of staving off the qualities held most responsible for the collapse of the Roman Empire—indolence, venality, lasciviousness, immorality, enervation, effeminateness—and replacing them with active, nationalist, military spirit. Since much of his *Cyder* is taken up with raising the military and cultural accomplishments of England over France, John Philips transfers the scene to a mythic Ariconium, the ancient English city free from foreign control but destroyed by natural disaster, and thereby mutes the allusion’s political tone:

Thus this fair City fell, of which the Name  
Survives alone; nor is there found a Mark,  
Whereby the curious Passenger may learn  
Her ample Site, save Coins, and mould'ring Urns,  
And huge unwieldy Bones, lasting Remains  
Of that Gigantic Race; which, as he breaks  
The clotted Glebe, the Plowman haply finds,  
Appall'd.

(Phillips 15-16)

Similarly, Watt's translation of Casimire's poem on the Polish victory over the Turks, is narrated by an old swain moved to reverie upon finding relics of war as he ploughs his field (Watts 229-238). And Boyse's translation of Van Haaren's "The Praise of Peace," a poem firmly committed to military readiness, neutralizes the image: "The *Peasant* as he ploughs with calm delight; / No bones (the marks of former slaughters) fright" (Boyse, Canto III, lines 258-259). But Addison, in *The Campaign* further manipulates the landscape, using it to imagine a very different kind of harvest:

...Heaps on Heaps expire,  
Nations with Nations mix'd confus'dly die,  
And lost, in one promiscuous Carnage lye.

How many gen'rous *Britons* meet their Doom,  
New to the Field, and Heroes in the Bloom!

(Addison 8)

So too does Nahum Tate's description of a battlefield in *The Triumph, or Warriours Welcome* (1705): "Point out the Field of War that ever bore / Or reap'd, a nobler Crop of Arms before, / No! never Field of Fame manur'd with richer Gore" (11). These images<sup>2</sup> celebrate, in anticipation of Felicia Hemans and Rupert Brooke, the fertilization of British spirit in foreign lands.

The limits of epic gore, then, are described by generic tradition. What's more, they are described by what Elaine Scarry has defined as the logic and object of war:

There are...three arenas of damage in war, three arenas of alteration: first, embodied persons; second, the material culture or self-extension of persons; third, immaterial culture, aspects of national consciousness, political belief, and self-definition. The object in war...is the third; for it is the national self-definitions of the disputing countries that have collided, and the dispute disappears if at least one of them agrees to retract, relinquish, or alter its own form of self-belief, its own form of self-extension. In war, the first and second forms of damage are the means for determining which of the two sides will undergo the third form of damage...in addition, once

the war is declared over, the first and second arenas of damage function as an abiding record of the third, surviving long after the day on which the injuring contest ended, objectifying the fact that such a contest occurred, that there was a war, that there was a winner and a loser. (Scarry 1985, 113-14)

The injured body is not a consequence of war but the very meaning and purpose of war. Gore may shock, but in so doing it becomes yet one more weapon of war, encouraging one side to surrender so the other may be declared victorious. Once war is over, poetic gore does not erase its meaning but rather instantiates it by means of verbally re-enacting the injury of the body, endlessly reminding the reader of how and why a culture was killed so another could flourish.

English poetry did not have to wait until Brooke's generation for poets to attempt uprooting the myths of war. Yet in trying to expose the glorification of war what Southey and Hunt fall victim too is the danger of cliché; as Sontag notes, "The image as shock and the image as cliché are two aspects of the same presence" (Sontag 2003, 23). Understandably, they seek to appropriate the language of war and use it for pacific ends. But at the very least the images they use catch them in a terrible cycle—one that describes peace as the absence of war, rather than as a state unto itself.

## **II. The Limits of Sympathetic Reading as Pacific Device**

In his study of British poetry during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, Simon Bainbridge suggests that the theorizing, thematizing, and activation of the imagination in poetry was essential for writers like Coleridge, Charlotte Smith and Robert Southey in getting their readers to grasp the horrors of war. In his introductory chapter, Bainbridge does well to show that the imagination might be used for writers of different political stripes. If one set of writers projects scenes of horror so as to decry war, another often calls on images of war to highlight the bravery of British troops (20-1). Though he acknowledges the openness of images to multiple and opposite interpretations, Bainbridge nevertheless fails to complicate the very act of imagination itself, assuming a direct relationship between the author's, the reader's, and the poetic figure's view. That one does not exist can be measured by historically shifting responses to the sentimental gestures found in many anti-war poems.

For example, the figure of the wife wandering through a battlefield in search of her husband is derided by D. B. Wyndham Lewis and Charles Lee in their famed anthology of bad verse, *The Stuffed Owl*. It is a popular motif, but the scene the editors single out for attention occurs in Erasmus Darwin's *The Loves of the Plants*, apparently because in it Darwin hauls out children to accompany the lonely wife, Eliza. No sooner does Eliza joyfully discover her warrior-husband is safe then she herself is hit by a bullet in the neck and dies, though not before hiding her children "in her blood-stain'd vest." Soon the warrior finds his dead wife, and, after calling out to heaven, wraps his children in "his crimson vest, / And clasp[s] them, sobbing, to his aching breast." The intention of the scene is to draw out the sympathy of the reader, who will

undoubtedly feel dismayed by witnessing the warrior first treading “o’er groaning heaps, the dying and the dead,” and then mourning his loved one in a series of sentimental postures: “Upturned his eyes, and clasp’d his hands, and sigh’d; / Stretch’d on the ground, awhile entranced he lay, / And press’d warm kisses on the lifeless clay.” On all of this the editors comment:

The vivid romance of Eliza which follows is unique in that never before has an English (or any other) poet so clearly demonstrated the folly of taking the children to see a battle. Not only does the constant rushing about make them peevish, fretful, and overheated, but a ball may easily sink into their mother’s neck and she may fall to the ground, hiding her babes within her blood-stained vest. The agony of the warrior after finishing the battle is graphically conveyed; yet he, too, has a blood-stained vest, in which he immediately wraps his children, thereby staving off the inevitable rash, whooping-cough, and croup. (105-107)

The dry mockery dismisses both the contrived situation and the overwrought emotions the passage tries to evoke: for Lewis and Lee this is bathos at its devilishly pleasing best.

Of course by 1930, when *The Stuffed Owl* was originally published, such stylized evocation of grief could only seem contrived in comparison with the works of David Jones, Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves. It would be a mistake, however, to join Lewis and Lee in peremptorily dismissing Darwin’s strategy, for scenes begging the reader to imagine sympathetically the horrors of war recur throughout poetry of the French Revolution and Napoleonic era. The frequency of its recurrence implies the strategy had some measure of literary success. After MacPherson’s *Ossian* poets learned that the epic tradition could be sentimentalized and thereby turned against its own imperial ideology. Thus Barlow’s *Columbiad* depicts a tearful Columbus regretting the destruction of America’s native peoples. And Helen Maria Williams’s *Peru* similarly offers a series of set-pieces in which native characters are killed by European invaders and grieved over by loved ones. In the latter, the author defends a character’s grief from the reader’s skepticism:

Ye who ne’er suffer’d passions hopeless pain,  
Deem not the toil that sooths its anguish vain;  
Its fondness to the mould’ring corpse extends,  
Its faithful tear with the cold ashes blends.  
Perchance, the conscious spirit of the dead  
Numbers the drops affections loves to shed;  
Perchance a sigh of holy pity gives  
To the sad bosom, where its image lives.  
Oh nature! sure thy sympathetic ties  
Shall o’er the ruins of the grave arise;

Undying spring from the relentless tomb,  
And shed, in scenes of love, a lasting bloom.  
(Williams 1784, Canto VI, lines 137-148)

Imagining what moves the “faithful tear” Williams also proposes that emotional bonds may defeat the grave, and in so doing creates a universal affective community into which the reader is now welcome. Sensibility itself appears in the final canto of the poem to mourn Las Casas, the “amiable Spanish ecclesiastic” who rescues several Peruvian characters in the poem and thereby serves as a contrast to the murderous Spanish conquistadores, transforming him into a kind of affective (rather than military) hero after whom the reader can model herself:

Las Casas' tear has moisten'd mis'ry's grave,  
His sigh has moan'd the wretch it fail'd to save!  
He, while conflicting pangs his bosom tear  
Has sought the lonely cavern of despair;  
Where desolate she fled, and pour'd her thought,  
To the dread verge of wild distraction wrought.  
White drops of mercy bath'd her hoary cheek,  
He pour'd by heav'n inspir'd its accents meek;  
In truth's clear mirror bade the mourner's view  
Pierce the deep veil which darkling error drew;  
And vanquish'd empire with a smile resign,  
'While brighter worlds in fair perspective shine.'  
(VI. lines 255-266)

The note of resignation, particularly of the Peruvian's vanquished empire for some more transcendent world, may ring hollow to modern ears, for it is a trope often sounded in poetry about slavery in which the slave is consoled with heavenly redemption. Genuine or not it hardly redresses the evils of human exploitation. Importantly, here Las Casas is depicted as a failure, having often to moan the wretch he failed to save. Like *Schindler's List* and *Hotel Rwanda* the audience is meant to identify with an individual (from a historically overwhelming minority), who could have accomplished more, whose failure is transmuted by the audience's sympathetic grief into a new kind of sentimental heroism. This response in turn transforms the reader into a hero as well, affording her a chance to solace herself that, had she been there, she too would have acted virtuously. Like Smith's investigation into moral sentiments and Burke's enquiry into the sublime, experiencing this morality means witnessing at a conveniently distant position. As much as this passage endorses sympathy it also exposes its limits.

Williams's *Peru* is hardly the first poem to have this problem. In Book IV of *The Task* William Cowper writes about his excitement at receiving the newspaper and yet glories in the fact of his distance from it all:

'Tis pleasant through the loop-holes of retreat

To peep at such a world. To see the stir  
 Of the great Babel and not feel the crowd.  
 To hear the roar she sends through all her gates  
 At a safe distance, where the dying sound  
 Falls a soft murmur on th' uninjur'd ear.  
 Thus sitting and surveying thus as ease  
 The globe and its concerns, I seem advanc'd  
 To some secure and more than mortal height,  
 That lib'rates and exempts me from them all.  
 It turns submitted to my view, turns round  
 With all its generations; I behold  
 The tumult and am still. The sound of war  
 Has lost its terrors 'ere it reaches me;  
 Grieves but alarms me not. I mourn the pride  
 And av'rice that makes man a wolf to man,  
 Hear the faint echo of those brazen throats  
 By which he speaks the language of his heart,  
 And sigh, but never tremble at the sound.  
 (Cowper ed. Sambrook 1994, 88-106)

Where earlier the experience of reading a newspaper is likened to a map (55-87), here the poet enters the topography and, as landscape poets of the century are wont to do, finds himself at a height from which he is able to survey and order all of life. Paradoxically, the very position that allows the expression of the poet's emotions only does so by negating his humanity. From a "more than mortal" height, the poet grieves at the sound of war but does not fear, mourns the sound of human brutality but does not tremble. One wonders how different he is from the serene angel in Addison's *The Campaign*, to whom the Duke of Marlborough at Blenheim is "in one of the most renowned similes in eighteenth-century literature" compared:<sup>3</sup>

So when an Angel, by Divine Command,  
 With rising Tempests shakes a guilty Land,  
 Such as of late o'er pale *Britannia* past,  
 Calm and Serene he drives the furious Blast;  
 And pleas'd th'Almighty's Orders to perform,  
 Rides in the Whirl-wind, and directs the Storm.  
 (Addison 14)

By naturalizing and literalizing the metaphor of newspaper-as-map into newspaper-as-landscape, Cowper unwittingly draws our attention to the artificiality of sentimental reading—for his position is not ours, and we are not likely to see or feel things the way he does.

More than two decades later, in "Eighteen Hundred and Eleven," Anna Barbauld implicitly critiques Cowper's position by depicting figures more closely connected to the events and names described in the newspaper:

Frequent, some stream obscure, some uncouth name  
 By deeds of blood is lifted into fame;  
 Oft o'er the daily page some soft-one bends  
 To learn the fate of husband, brothers, friends,  
 Or the spread map with anxious eye explores,  
 Its dotted boundaries and penciled shores,  
 Asks *where* the spot that wrecked her bliss is found,  
 And learns its name but to detest the sound.  
 (Barbauld ed. McCarthy and Kraft 2002, 31-38)

This time the map is actually a map, and it is used so the third-person mourner, gendered female and “soft,” may know with as much detail as possible the circumstances of her lover’s death. She desires to know precisely “*where*” the death took place, further localizing her grief but simultaneously turning it to hatred. Where Cowper’s reading checks his emotions, Barbauld’s figure reads with an anxiety that may lead to anger. As distancing as Cowper’s view is, Barbauld’s may be too overwrought.

The question remains, then, can and ought a reader identify with what she reads. In “Fears in Solitude,” Coleridge implies that when it comes to newspapers the answer is no, for, sensing that many who “would groan to see a child / Pull of an insect’s leg” yet “read of war” with no hesitation, he suggests that the technical language of newspapers is responsible for emotional detachment:

The poor wretch, who has learnt his only prayers  
 From curses, who knows scarcely words enough  
 To ask a blessing from his Heavenly Father,  
 Becomes a fluent phraseman, absolute  
 And technical in victories and defeats,  
 And all our dainty terms for fratricide;  
 Terms which we trundle smoothly o’er our tongues  
 Like mere abstractions, empty sounds to which  
 We join no feeling and attach no form!  
 As if the soldier died without a wound;  
 As if the fibres of this godlike frame  
 Were gored without a pang; as if the wretch,  
 Who fell in battle, doing bloody deeds,  
 Passed off to Heaven, translated and not killed.  
 (Coleridge ed. Jackson 1985, 108-121)

Once again here the position of the reader shifts. To Cowper’s educated poet and Barbauld’s grieving female, Coleridge (with not a little condescension) adds the poor, uneducated wretch who has neither lost a loved one nor can afford retirement. This wretch cannot sympathize with the soldier because the newspaper’s language abstracts the meaning of his death. Words are less than mere abstractions, they are “empty sounds” (thus not the sounds of grief). If the wretch is a stand-in for the reader his inability to feel is ours as well. But it is less

his, and our, fault than that of the newspapers themselves, which move him toward complacency by euphemizing, or “translating,” the rigors of war into clinical, technical, and therefore more palatable, terms.<sup>4</sup>

By attacking the rhetoric of newspapers, and doing so in the language of poetry, Coleridge reveals a faith in sympathetic reading reserved only for literary contexts. Thus, by the time the apt reader concludes the poem he will not only share Coleridge’s loathing for war but shall also have moved with him into a poetic retreat not altogether different from Cowper’s—a rarified place indeed, and one as we have already seen not without its own affective complications. Coleridge’s vision is elitist, but as Michael Simpson has argued, his willingness upon the Peace of Amiens to republish excerpts of “Fears in Solitude” in the very newspapers he disparages may represent a democratization or a selling-out of his morals. At the very least it highlights internal contradictions that may already be in place. Why, for example, cannot the apt reader, as opposed to the poor wretch and like the poet himself, from the very beginning decode the language of newspapers and maintain his feelings? Such contradictions, discernable in all of the aforementioned poems, demonstrate that the process of reading about war is as fraught with potential disconnections as affective connections. This has less to do with diction than the automatically distanced position the reader is required to take given the nature of writing and reading itself.

The problem of sympathetic connection is embedded in the epic tradition, originating in the Hector and Andromache scenes of *The Iliad* and in opposing interpretations of Homer’s poem. Eighteenth-century reception of Homer splits on whether *The Iliad* is too savage and brutal. While many feel the poem errs in casting a raging Achilles as its hero, others approve of the complexity and realistic range of the characters’ emotions. The poem is thus open to multiple interpretations. Fielding’s novels alone, for example, register this potential. In *Joseph Andrews*, Parson Adams says of Homer: “If he hath any superior Excellence to the rest, I have been inclined to fancy it is in the Pathetick. I am sure I never read with dry Eyes, the two Episodes, where *Andromache* is introduced, in the former lamenting the Danger, and in the latter the Death of *Hector*. The Images are so extremely tender in these, that I am convinced, the Poet had the worthiest and best Heart imaginable” (Fielding ed. Goldberg 1987, 155). Before taking this at face value one should recall that Adams is never slow with a fist, at least when one *seems* (Adams is a notoriously poor judge of characters and situations) needed. Epic sympathy does not necessarily lead to pacifism. If it even registers. In *Jonathan Wild*, the criminal protagonist is described as having from childhood been quite influenced by Homer’s epic—but, it turns out, by all the wrong passages, as when “*Achilles* is said to have bound two Sons of *Priam* upon a Mountain, and afterwards released them for a Sum of Money...[and] the Account which *Nestor* gives in the same Book, of the rich Booty which he bore off (i.e. stole) from the *Eleans*” (Fielding ed. Amory 2003, 13-14). Wild derives his misinterpretation of “virtue” from the epic tradition—but is this the fault of his own ignorance or the ambiguity of the tradition itself?

Where Fielding splits different responses to the epic into different characters and different novels, Laurence Sterne embodies the contradictions in *Uncle Toby*. Such is Toby’s enthusiasm for following news of the War of Spanish

Succession that after the Treaty of Utrecht, “to the end of his life he never could hear *Utrecht* mentioned upon any account whatever...without fetching a sigh, as if his heart would break in twain” (Sterne ed. Watt 1965, 347-8). In response to a teasing remark from Walter Shandy, Uncle Toby writes an apologetical oration defending his stance on war in general. For one, he writes, he can hardly be blamed for a natural enthusiasm for war: “If, when I was a school-boy, I could not hear a drum beat, but my heart beat with it—was it my fault?—Did I plant the propensity there?—did I sound the alarm within, or Nature?” (349). He goes on to add that, this predilection notwithstanding, he has always felt sympathy for the victims of war. Remarkably this sympathy, like Parson Adams’s, is made on a literary register:

When we read over the siege of *Troy*, which lasted ten years and eight months...was I not as much concerned for the destruction of the *Greeks* and *Trojans* as any boy of the whole school? Had I not three strokes of a ferula given me, two on my right hand and one on my left, for calling *Helena* a bitch for it? Did any one of you shed more tears for *Hector*? And when king *Priam* came to the camp to beg his body, and returned weeping back to *Troy* without it,—you know, brother, I could not eat my dinner.—

Did that bespeak me cruel? Or because, brother *Shandy*, my blood flew out into the camp, and my heart panted for war,—was it a proof it could not ache for the distresses of war too? (350)

While epic poetry may have taught Toby how to feel, there is little expression of loss regarding current events. Indeed, as Toby goes on to acknowledge that a man may gather laurels and scatter cypress; may march bravely and be the first to enter the breach and also reflect on the miseries of war; may naturally be ill-shaped for war; yet he concludes by defending some wars, particularly the current war, as being fought: “by NECESSITY...For what is war?...when fought as ours has been, upon principles of *liberty*, and upon principles of *honour*” (350). Here Toby sounds a typical note, justifying England as defending against France’s encroachment upon the European balance of power.

Though he feels guilty about it Toby cannot escape, and therefore tries to justify, his attraction to war. Of course, Toby’s incapacity to express emotion directly (in confrontations he is typically moved to whistle Lilibullero) and his inability to interact with Widow Wadman, is the result of his being physically unmanned at the siege of Namur. Where sympathetic feelings induce tears and feminine sensibilities, Toby’s hobbyhorical enthusiasm for war news and his drive to re-enact the siege of Namur in a scaled replica on his lawn reveals his need to re-masculate himself. In is one thing to cry for Priam, but another to cry for an actual person—or, perhaps on certain occasions even more difficult, for oneself. Brilliantly, Sterne makes the one character fully capable of empathizing with war victims the very same person who must avoid it. Where a full

acknowledgment of another's pain would entail a frightening (perhaps, in modern terms, healthy) admission of the limits of the self, that very admission would render impossible the notion of total empathy.

As in the use of gore, sympathy has its limits. Where then does this leave the reader, and the author who would move her reader to decry war? Near the end of *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag argues that in order seriously to interrogate the meaning of violence we need to push beyond sympathy:

The imaginary proximity to the suffering inflicted on others that is granted by images suggests a link between the far-away sufferers—seen close-up on the television screen—and the privileged viewer that is simply untrue, that is yet one more mystification of our real relations to power. So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused our suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent—if not an inappropriate—response. To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may—in ways we might prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others, is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark. (102-3)

Insofar as they are considered ends in themselves, the shock and sentimentalism evoked by images, verbal or visual, will fail to produce a meaningful discourse against war. The images discussed throughout this essay seek to end conversation with sighs and tears, but in so doing they participate—willingly or not—in a chorus of war that has been echoing since time immemorial. Recognizing the harm done to one's "brother," recognizing "individuality," will not manifest a peaceful world until one understands that the drive to kill itself comes from a personal (as opposed to cultural, national) drive to assert (even, or, especially internally) various kinds of selves over others.

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<sup>1</sup> Rarely does a peaceful georgic landscape fail to call up some relic of war, whether in protest or celebration. One instance occurs in Hughes's "Triumph of Peace" (1697), where the poet celebrates the return of soldiers to their land: "No more for want of hands th' unlabour'd field, / Chok'd with rank weeds, a sickly crop shall yield; / Calm Peace returns; behold her shining train! / And fruitful Plenty is restor'd again" (Chalmers 568). In his "House of Nassau" (1702), however, the image crops up as expected: "While in Hibernia's fields the labouring swain / Shall pass the plough o'er skulls of warriors slain, / And turn up bones, and broken spears, / Amaz'd, he'll show his fellows of the plain, / The reliques of victorious years; / And tell, how swift thy arms that kingdom did regain. / Flandria, a longer witness to thy glory, / With wonder too repeats thy story" (Chalmers 574).

<sup>2</sup> A few more of the many: in Samuel Cobb's *Pax Redux* (London, 1697), War rests "with Scars of Honour plough'd upon his Breast" (p. 1); Matthew Morgan's *A Poem to the King, upon the Conclusion of the Peace* (1698) refers to the swords with which English soldiers "crops of Slaughter from the Field did reap" (p. 3); and William Whitehead's *Verses to the People of England, 1758* (1758) rouses Britons to deeds of death so they may not "lose the harvest of your swords / In a civil war of words!" (p. 1).

<sup>3</sup> David B. Morris, *The Religious Sublime: Christian Poetry and Critical Tradition in 18<sup>th</sup>-Century England* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972), 113.

<sup>4</sup> Years after I first wrote this essay, Mary A. Favret's *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) was published. Her sense of the cultural creation of "wartime," the mediated experience of war through newspapers, landscape paintings, and even meteorological discourse, perhaps offers a more optimistic view of the results of such responses to violent calamity.