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War

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Cornelia Pearsall

Victorians enjoyed a few months of peace, here or there. Otherwise, theirs was a nation and a period constantly at war, defined traditionally as declared armed conflict between nations or states, a contest to persuade, or overwhelm, by force. Factoring in less traditionally defined but nevertheless organized collective hostile engagements in defense or pursuance of Britain's perceived interests, one would strain in scanning the full stretch of the Victorian timeline to spot the days when arms were laid down. This fact merits our keener attention because in a sense attention and more particularly its lack is a crucial feature of Victorian war awareness, and our own. My concern here is less with any specific scare or scars than with the social and cultural impact of what I would term war abstractedness: war was what happened while most Victorians were busy making other plans. Unquestionably, war flared into acute public awareness at numerous flashpoints throughout the period — phenomena often well-studied — but we have attended insufficiently to a broad-based Victorian abstractedness regarding war; that is, to a kind of disregarding of war, a cognitive and affective inattentiveness or absence to its ever-presence. Maintaining this steady lack of focus on or indeed gaze away from war required energies, I would argue, akin to those expended in its waging.

Concurrent with whatever other Victorian subjects occupy our attention, war was essentially always being waged. What are the implications for its literature and culture, indeed for every aspect of its social being, for a nation to be almost continuously at war, somewhere or another, somehow or another? To see Victorian war steadily and see it whole would be to see not only the powerful impact of war in the abstract but to see the forms abstractedness takes. Complex and shifting literary and visual kinds; beautifully weighted conversations and densely

freighted compositions; meaningful gestures, pregnant pauses, killing looks: whatever their temporal or spatial dimensions, these and innumerable other representational practices take place and shape in wartime. Most appear abstracted from that fact; without recognition, no reckoning.

It is not news that wars for territory and sovereignty, forwarding instrumental and ideological aims, were frequent and wide-spread — indeed they often constituted the news, trooping through numerous dailies and periodicals, as our archival databases easily demonstrate with the flick of a finger. Queen Victoria's reign began with a brief Anglo-American kerfuffle near Niagara Falls and the more consequential advent of the First Afghan War and ended in the bloody thick of the Boer War. In between, the sun never set on British skirmishes, some conflicts germinating further conflicts, others sprouting fresh. War demarcates formally from other modes of violence, although its many derivations include sexual assault, genocide, and other instantiations of brutality, whether systemic, spontaneous, or symbolic: imperial and colonial aggression and defense, annexations, attacks, defeats, escalations, expeditions, invasions, slaughters, suppressions, repulsions, retreats, victories, lives given, lives taken. Although it is critical when considering Victorian war to distinguish among specific conflicts, regions, and persons, as well as ecologies damaged and cultural productions spawned – what war destroys and what it generates — my point here is to ask what happens when we track not only the implications of the iterativeness and unendingness of war for this culture in the abstract, but its abstractedness from this fact. Attention to a generalized inattention may help account for a tremendous range of cultural and social manifestations of unease and anxiety, vulnerability and precariousness, apprehension and alarm.

Given war's enormities, what could possibly cause our own distraction in attending to it? Perhaps whatever it is that makes it challenging to hold our own unceasing war-waging in

sustained and unflinching, or even flinching, recognition. Essentially always at war and, despite exceptional moments of societal apprehension, only sometimes somewhat aware of it: Victorian Britain in this regard, and disregard, bears resemblance to contemporary America. Even a cursory glance at historical causation will suggest that this consonance is in consequence, as numerous current global situations of destabilization and devastation were set in motion by Victorian aggression and interference. Localized causes and consequences demand keen attention, as do the cumulative effects on this culture of being at war more or less all the time. Bearing war in mind can in turn illuminate texts and contexts seemingly unrelated to it, recalling to us that Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre and Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" were written in wartime no less than Alfred Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade," however distinctive each war and differentiated its wider recognition.

It is a far war, geographically and historically, that Matthew Arnold has in mind in "Dover Beach," but its representation at once dramatizes and counters Victorian war abstractedness. The poem opens with a speaker summoning his "love" to the window, to breathe in the sweet night air of the English coast and reflect with him on Sophocles and other matters. As Victorianists will recall (the poem's canonicity is itself relevant), after realizing that a world that had seemed wondrous is "really" without "certitude," "peace," nor "help for pain," the speaker concludes,

And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.¹

Alluding to Thucydides' account in History of the Peloponnesian War of a night battle at Epipolae, where friend cannot be distinguished from foe, the poet acknowledges the

impossibility of remove from military conflict. Whatever else this pair may be doing — standing, speaking, breathing — they simultaneously plunge through the fog of war, struggling with ignorance not only in battle but, more, of battle. Published in Arnold's 1867 New Poems, "Dover Beach" was likely first drafted sometime between 1848-52, during which years British armies were engaged in the Eighth Xhosa War in the Cape Colony, the Battle of Chillianwala during the Second Anglo-Sikh War, and the Second Anglo-Burmese War in Lower Burma, while at home many civilians actively prepared for a French invasion of the English coast. The poem charges a historical battlefield rather than, whatever their geographic distance from or nearness to Dover, these more temporally proximate conflicts. The simile heralded by "As" (as if "on a darkling plain"), announces this abstracted relation to war, a looking away from what the speaker claims to see. And yet, for all the distancing enabled by metaphor, the lovers' presence in war's present is entire: "And we are here." An extraordinarily consequential reckoning for so simple a declarative: "And" and "we" signifying formal and affective inclusion; "are" establishing the temporal present; "here" affirming spatial presence on an inescapable battlefield. We should recognize Victorian war abstractedness in the presence of more or less perpetual wartime because we share it, clashing ignorantly on that darkling plain: And we are here, too.

Notes

1. Matthew Arnold, The Poems of Matthew Arnold, ed. Kenneth Allott (London: Longmans, 1965), 242-43.