‘Fading Crimean Flowers’: Spasmodic *Sonnets on the War*

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Abstract

In their refusal to aestheticise Crimean warfare, as most of their fellow poets and newspapermen had done, Sydney Dobell and Alexander Smith, in the co-authored *Sonnets on the War* (1855) present a harrowing picture of the conflict from myriad viewpoints, all of which deny the patriotism and hawkishness implicit in glamorising armed conflict. This poly-vocalic collection pushes more boundaries than has previously been noticed. The choice of form, itself a commentary – this is not a war fit for epic – the emphasis on women’s roles, and the anonymous and ventriloquised voicing announce departures from conventions of martial verse, and also from what we have heretofore understood about these poets’ careers.

Keywords: Crimea, war poetry, Spasmodics, Sydney Dobell, Alexander Smith, drama, women

Whether or not Elizabeth Barrett Browning actually read *Sonnets on the War* (1855), co-authored by Alexander Smith and Sydney Dobell, she eagerly awaited its publication, writing to friends to ask whether they had seen the new book, an understandable urgency given that, as Charles LaPorte has shown, she had learned so much from Smith’s first. So when

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the *Athenaeum* printed six full sonnets therefrom on 13 January 1855, Owen Meredith (Lord Lytton) wrote immediately to her in Florence, tracing 'Alexander Smith' in block letters in the middle of the page creating a bold effect, as though the book's release belonged on a marquee (Lytton 95). Although he would later praise Smith in a sonnet of his own, Meredith mocks the war poems.[1] 'I perceive that Alexander Smith is chanting War Songs,' he jibes, 'as thus':

> England. France. Glory. Trumpets. Cannons.
> Thunder. Smoke. Hurricanes of horse.
> Volcanos of Artillery. Charge! Dash!
> Splash! Crash! Smash! Hash! Fizz-Wizz.
> bang. bang. bang!!!!…[sic] Glory. England. France. (1–5)

Meredith's is at least as funny a send-up of the Spasmodic style as other derisive imitations. He mocks at once the fragmentary nature of the collection, its political range – one of the poems he surely has in mind is titled 'Italy. Poland. France.' – and the bewildering quality the poems possess as they mimic the dislocation and fragmentary nature not only of Crimean War reporting, but also of the mixed feelings engendered by the war itself. After having read them, Barrett Browning defends the sonnets' affective power, comparing them favourably with Tennyson's and Massey's war poems: 'several of the A.S. sonnets on the other hand were intense – I thought two of them fine, in particular' (Barrett Browning 102). Importantly, she also compares them in the same sentence to the war's most famous poem, writing 'Tennyson's "Light Brigade" is ragged & unartistic for so great an artist' (102).

Although recent books by Stefanie Markovits and Orlando Figes have considerably broadened our understanding of the sheer force and imaginative space that the Crimean war occupied in the Victorian artistic imagination, they do not dwell on *Sonnets on the War* (1855), a volume that has garnered little critical attention from any quarter. Early Victorian poetic anthologies include poems from Smith and Dobell, but rarely any of these sonnets. Histories of war poetry generally fail even to footnote them. Most scholars of the Spasmodic movement pass over *Sonnets on the War*, focusing nearly always on Smith's first book and, curiously, on Dobell's second.[2] Finally, the book's reviewers had little to say about *Sonnets on the War*, an especially odd quietude given that those same reviewers seem to have been staging a breathless contest of effusive praise over each poet's previous book.[3]

As others have noted, Smith, Dobell, and the Spasmodic poets dominated literary conversation in the 1850s on either side of the Atlantic, their writing so radical that some reviewers referred to it simply as 'the new poetry' (Rudy 102). It sold staggeringly well, pulling in not only the intelligentsia, 'but the working classes, churchmen, and Americans as well'. So the relative critical silence over a collaborative book authored by the two leading lights of the new poetry is startling, especially since the poems range so widely and catch so vividly a national mood of tension and confusion in a watershed year.

There are two exceptions to this silence: one article by Natalie Houston, which reads *Sonnets on the War* as nostalgia, locks of hair to send back home in the heyday of souvenir trading, and a portion of Stephanie Markovits' *Crimean War in the British Imagination.* Markovits believes that Smith and Dobell's sonnets are more important as war documents than has previously been acknowledged, but makes a number of claims about these little-known but historically (and aesthetically) significant sonnets that merit re-consideration. This essay reads *Sonnets on the War* to show how the very techniques that earned Smith and Dobell's debuts infamy enabled a clear-eyed and powerful account of the Crimean struggle, a refutation of the egotism that plagued them, a poignant focus on women in the war and an early critique of the poetic tendency to glamorise martial combat.

Scholars generally have it that the Spasmodics wrote ego-inflated verse that an increasingly sophisticated public in the middle 1850s found distasteful, but the co-authorship of *Sonnets on the War* suggests we should revise that charge. When *Sonnets on the War* was published, neither poet took credit for particular sonnets leaving readers to guess the authorship of each or to decide whether they were all written together somehow. Neither the table of contents, nor the poetic voice, nor the content of any individual sonnet reveal its author. That anonymity is significant since the poets had both been called fame-hungry (*Reading* 30). Surely, given that their stars were in the ascendant following the success of previous books, they would want to feed demand for their work. But Smith and Dobell demur, effacing themselves as if pre-emptively eschewing the notion of individual genius, of any individuality at all, or of the lyric personage's privileged position. In a deft public relations move, if nothing else, these so-called individualistic poets, besotted by their own genius, exemplars of self-aggrandisement, efface themselves completely in this outing, mixing authorial registers and speaking on behalf of others. In fact, the collection channels the poly-vocal *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* or 'Maga', a group authorship which Matt Salyer calls 'an argument for the subordination of individual talents […] to

tradition, community, and received forms' (93). Such evasiveness permits what Houston calls the collection's very different function, which 'present[s] multiple perspectives and disjunctions, rather than an ideal unified image' (360). Houston is right, but I want to suggest three further functions of its poly-vocalism: the ventriloquism of war responses permits the poets to draw on their backgrounds in drama, it subverts a sonnet form meant to be personal and confessional in service of public good, and it allows them to write in a sensational manner without sounding histrionic, to give events a measure of their actual detail and strength without coming unhinged.

Dramatic Voice

Sonnets on the War is built on several layers of poly-vocality. One is the collaborative mentioned above, that in co-authoring the collection, Smith and Dobell efface individuality in favour of collective production. Although Herbert Tucker centers the Spasmodic aesthetic as a heightening of the Romantic privileged place of the artist, in *Sonnets on the War*, the poets move effectively away from the assumption of a privileged lyrical subject (340). But there is another function. Rather than the fixed laudatory omniscience of Tennyson's 'Charge of the Light Brigade' – and in addition to the destabilised dual perspective of poets working in tandem – *Sonnets* speaks for a broad cast of characters: politicians, waiting mothers, surgeons in medical tents, among others variously affected by the conflict. Smith and Dobell create a cast of characters for their sonnet collection, creating voices for – and therefore more effectively empathising with – the many players in an international real-world tragedy.

At such work Smith and Dobell were practised hands, having each previously produced blockbuster dramas. Although known to history as the Spasmodic poets, the group might just as well be called the Spasmodic playwrights, since nearly all of them – Smith and Dobell, but also Phillip James Bailey and J. Stanyan Bigg – produced verse-drama as first works. Published under the anagram Sydeny Ynedys, Dobell's debut, *The Roman* (1850), urged bloody conflict in an attempt to fan the nascent Risorgimento to flame. At least as importantly for our purposes, *The Roman* features recognisable characters and voices, plot, and settings. Similarly, Smith's *A Life-Drama* (1853) features vivid settings and characters that resonated with the public. Far from the solipsistic paean to individuality it is often cast as, *A Life-Drama* revels in distinct personhood.

Both Smith's and Dobell's first books took seriously their dramatic commitments. Although for most scholars looking back it is difficult to see *The Roman*, or *A Life-Drama* as more than egotistical effusions, it can help to view the poems as did their first readers, who were often moved not, importantly, by the poems' surface features, but by the characters and their voices. Periodicals fawned over Smith's bridge prostitute and Dobell's priest.[4] Early readers did not unanimously see these figures as vague poeticisms, but as what they are: figures in dramatic settings. The poets, far from imagining the protagonists as versions of themselves, did not even see them as heroes. As dramatists, Smith and Dobell created the same distance most playwrights have from their subjects, criticising them, killing them off, and all the other bag and baggage of the theatrical outing. This distance is an essential feature for writing about the war because the dramatic representation of characters with distinct linguistic registers allows a representation of conflict equal to such a conflicted, multi-front, multi-media war as the Crimean. Smith and Dobell accept that neither a unified national position nor even clear reportage was possible given the war's scale. It was, as we have had too frequent cause to say in the last century, a different kind of war.

Patriot Missive

The most famous poem of the Crimean War, which Barrett Browning criticised, but which her husband Robert Browning, damning with faint praise, said at least contained 'the germ in it of a great lyric', is Tennyson's 'Charge of the Light Brigade' (1854) (Browning 100). An account of a military disaster rendered as a heroic act of pure bravery and self-sacrifice, called rightly by Markovits the 'best remembered cultural product of the war', it is as patriotic a poem as we have. Even blundering, those involved are revered (*Crimean* 3). 'When can their glory fade?' Tennyson's poem asks, implying 'never' (50). An appropriate answer would be: it fades as soon as one finds out that 600 men wasted their lives because a general was ineffectively in command of them, and/or their testosterone charge short-circuited their hearing and they broke the chain of command. Still, the reader is ordered to 'honor the Light Brigade' in a one-sided nationalistic whitewash of a complicated history (54).

Another typical poetic response to the Crimean war is Gerald Massey's. A friend of the Spasmodics who also wrote about the conflict, and on whose work Barrett Browning also commented, his *War Waits* (1855) has not anywhere near the force or nuance of Smith and Dobell's *Sonnets*. Rather, it reads more like the usual Victorian chest-thumping:

hyper-patriotic and full of exclamation points and notions of old glory. Lines such as these from 'England Goes to Battle', are representative:

> Now, glory to our England,
> As she rises, calm and grand,
> With the ancient spirit in her eyes,
> The good Sword in her hand! (9–12)
> […]
> Thou crest on the forehead of Freedom,
> While the Tyrant's sun darkens in blood,
> Burn on in thy riper radiance,
> In the name of the most High God! (21–4)

Typical of the Tennysonian mode, the poem is simple, overly rhythmic, jaunty, and brave. Smith and Dobell's mode, by contrast, is realist, confrontational, and brave in a different way.

> The War rolls on. Dark failure, brave success
> Deafen our ears. But little power to touch
> Our deeper human nature lies in such. (1–4)
> […]
> Each hath his separate rack of sore distress.
> No hand can give an alms, no power consoles;
> We only have our true hearts and our souls. (8–10)

Variegated success and failure is necessarily the sum of any military engagement, as Smith and Dobell rightly observe. The same success and failure mark attempts to use language as a cure for pain; 'no power consoles', the poem admits. How much better if poets responded to the pain of others more often with that kind of realism? This renunciation of both individualism and the unified image of poetic power allow the breakthrough in form that makes *Sonnets on the War* a success. Markovits agrees about the radicalism in their use of form:

> While [Smith and Dobell] were not exactly trying to effect a cure – in their bewildering impact, the sonnets represent a descriptive, even paradigmatic response to the poetic challenges brought on by the Crimean War. The poets were attempting to create forms that would do justice to a variety of experience – both in the Crimea and on the homefront – for which they could find no precedent. (148)

The sense of having to do justice to the real experience of the war's myriad participants belongs to the dramatist, who owes verity not only to his conscience, but also to his characters.

Rather than adding to the abstractions and hyperbolic valorisation of the military written by their peers in response to the conflict, Smith and Dobell jump entirely into the experience of the Crimean war on the parts of soldiers, nurses, and the population back home eager for news. But the poems are not in any sense bearers of that news: they are not reportage. At this point, I depart from Houston, who compares *Sonnets on the War* to Roger Fenton's wartime photographs, calling them 'examples of the cultural logic of the souvenir, which 'use the sonnet form to capture and record moments of time' (381). In the same essay, she refers to the poems as 'journalistic' because '[they] refuse abstraction from their historical context […] [and] seek not only to memorialize the war's events, but also to document them' (362). I am thankful that Houston discusses these sonnets at all, since most critics imagine Smith's career ended with *A Life-Drama*, and Dobell's began with *Balder*, but in what sense are the poems journalistic? They are impressionistic and, as Houston rightly points out, poly-vocalic, but neither term mirrors journalism; in fact, such methods are detrimental to the documentarian, who seeks clarity, concision, and subdued voice.

The poems do not refuse abstraction from their particular context as Houston claims; they work just as well in the abstract as in the particular, and as documentary they are useless. One reason is that they are uninterested in the facts on the ground. Reading one of the poems does not give one a clearer idea of the event under discussion. Houston cites the following, from 'The Cavalry Charge', as evidence:

> I saw them part
> The Death-Sea as an English dog leaps o'er
> the rocks into the ocean. He goes in
> Thick as a lion, and he comes out thin
> As a starved wolf. (7–11)

The poem finely evokes the thinned English ranks following the famous charge, but it in no way clarifies what happened on 25 October 1854. The remnant of bedraggled soldiers in the American Civil War must have looked just the same, plunging into battle polished and enthusiastic, and limping out noticeably thinned. Furthermore, the lines quoted above – 'The War rolls on. Dark failure, brave success / Deafen our ears. But little power to touch / Our deeper human nature lies in such' – might as easily have been written in 2015 as in1855. War *does* roll on. It mixes 'dark failure' and 'brave success' now as then. Even today, the population back home has difficulty feeling the real weight of war at

such great distances and feels conflicted as to how it can emotionally participate, or in what sense it should seek to.

Neither can they be considered souvenirs. Souvenirs render difficult or complex histories palatable for the folks back home; they imply kitsch and safety, but these poems are both too visceral and too detailed for that. Although the sonnets do render large events in the smallest of forms – a war that calls for epic is here given a space reserved for lovers – *Sonnets on the War* does not minimise its subject thereby, retaining, even emphasising, the pain and difficulty of the conflict for individuals. Some poems dramatise the war's costs in a manner almost indecent in candour. 'The Wounded', for example, shows a surgeon arguing with an amputee about whether the soldier's life is worth saving:

> 'Thou canst not wish to live', the surgeon said.
> He clutched him, as a soul thrust forth from bliss
> Clings to the ledge of Heaven! 'Would'st thou keep this
> Poor branchless trunk?' (1–4)

The wounded man responds that, even mangled, he would rather survive, that he might again see his beloved: 'But she would lean my head / Upon her breast; oh, let me live!' (4–5). To which the cool surgeon counters, 'Be wise', as though the wounded man's wish is selfish (5). Ever hopeful, the soldier says, 'I could be very happy; both these eyes / Are left me [...]' (6–7). The next lines continue the plea, its lineation sharp as shrapnel:

> 'I should see her; she would kiss
> My forehead; only let me live'.–He dies
> Even in the passionate prayer. (7–9)

The line 'only let me live', / He dies' is as devastating as war really is. It is a version *avant la lettre* of Neruda's 'the blood of the children ran through the streets / without fuss, like children's blood' (49–50). There is no attempt to limit the disturbing effects of war here, to give quarter to sensitive palates.

Discussing 'The Wounded I' and 'II', Markovits concurs with Houston's assessment of the poems. Before noting 'the range of the wounded soldiers responses' and the 'diversity of the soldiers themselves', Markovits describes the poems as 'sentimentally patriotic' (136). Markovits is a keen reader, but it is difficult to see how these poems are either sentimental or patriotic. Would not highlighting the diversity of the wounded, emphasising the brotherhood of man as opposed to

that of nation, remove, rather than intensify, patriotism? And what would the sentiment be? One can see how Massey's sonnet relies on sentiment and can even concede with Barrett Browning that Tennyson's does likewise, but Smith and Dobell's forceful sonnets strip sentiment away as rudely and as certainly as the army surgeon a gangrenous limb.

Although some have said that poetry's main interest in war is size, the unblinking lack of discretion or whitewash in these poems and the degree of detail prevent them from seeming small. According to Thomas Rommel, 'poetry of the Crimean war', particularly, is 'concerned with death and destruction on a large scale' (121). It is a scale so large, he contends, that 'the effects of what it meant to the wounded on the battlefield or in the hospitals are made invisible' (121). This is true of Tennyson's grand abstraction of heroism. Though the famous adjective is descriptive first – they were a light cavalry – 'the light brigade' as a phrase abstracts soldiers into a heavenly substance, as if they were lasers or photons. Rommel is essentially noting that what seized poets working on the Crimean conflict was the sublime. For him, that awe and attention precluded focus on the actual persons involved, dehumanising the war and making it more palatable for the British population. For others, a dominant feature of Crimean War poetry is what Rommel calls the 'process of distancing and thereby limiting the disturbing effects that descriptions of war have on the individual', where 'irritating details' are 'glossed over' (121). But it is not true of Dobell and Smith's poems, which show no such limitation or distance. Poems such as 'Childless', which imagines the pain of the many parents who lost children in the war, foreground precisely those irritating details of suffering over which Rommel says most Crimean war poems gloss:

> The Son thou sentest forth is now a Thought–
> A Dream. To all but thee he is as nought
> As if he had gone back into the same
> Bosom that bore him. (1–4)

In this poem, sacrifice is both real and total: not even a body remains. Nor even does glory, the pabulum of so many such sacrificers because, the poets point out, there are just too many dead for the country to remember them all. To the whole world, he might as well never have existed. For the forgotten soldier's parents, though, the whole world has ceased to exist, except the 'deep [...] texture of that single weight of ground' where he is buried. The contrast between Smith and Dobell's approach and the limitation of disturbing effects that characterises the dominant poetry of the Crimean War could hardly be more stark.

But the poems are not all depictions of suffering; *Sonnets on the War* also confronts the practicalities of war on a political level. The poems move across the map like troops. Sonnets such as 'Poland. Italy. Hungry', 'Jerusalem', and 'Austrian Alliance' engage the realpolitik of the war as the poets understand it, not in some jingle of swords and bravery, but with practical advice. With 'trust not a royal coat, / My country!' the poets warn that the soul of the Hapsburg house has fled, never to return (2–3). 'America', considers the prospect of the U.S. joining the war on the Russian side as against England, which it nearly did, in hopes of dissuading it. 'Men say, Columbia, we shall hear thy guns', it forebodes, but concludes that the eventuality is unlikely because the two countries share a common language (1).[5] After all, 'In what tongue shall be thy battle cry?' the poem asks (2). We share Shakespeare and ancestors, it reasons; 'Shall we fight?' (14). To which the answer can only be: well, yes, we shall and have, but one senses in this poem less a policy argument than an attempt to turn public opinion. Addressed to Americans, the poem urges potential combatants to consider American similarities with the British before engaging.

Women in War

The inclusion of women both as agents in the war and as observers of it is another notable feature of this collection, the most significant of whom is Florence Nightingale. Literary tributes to Nightingale proliferated of course, but few gave her the pride of place she is given in *Sonnets*, which suggests that her story will outlast every other aspect of the conflict. Not all scholars admire Victorian depictions of the heroic nurse. Some criticise poetic depictions of Nightingale in Crimean war verse on the basis that she is rarely seen touching the patients or actually *doing* anything. They render her a passive figure. Rommel dismisses, for instance, depictions of 'the gentle lady with the lamp' for whom 'to take the initiative, to be active, and have physical contact with the wounded does not seem to be an option' (119). His examples are Philip Hamerton's 1855 lyric and Martin Farquhar Tupper's 1860 lyric, which evoke only crowded corridors of pain and the nurse's impotent rounds.

Of course, we need not dismiss such tributes as Hamerton's and Tupper's by discounting the increased morale, even the healing, soldiers seem to have experienced simply by seeing Nightingale pass. Rather than reading her lack of contact with bodies as an attempt to deny feminine agency, we can read poets like Tupper and Hamerton as placing her in a what was possibly a more admirable, and even a more

effective, role: muse of health. While one woman could not possibly have touched and treated each wounded patient individually, she could provide hope to everyone who saw her, even those who only saw her lamp pass by on nightly walks. If Nightingale was important as an actual person, she was also important as a symbol: a mascot of purity, competence, and calm in an overwhelming and violent place, at least as effective in the latter role as she was as a single individual changing dressings and emptying bed pans.

Again though, Smith and Dobell supply what is missing for Rommel in depictions of Nightingale. In 'Miss Nightingale', the lady with the lamp is the very active agent for which Rommel longs, making the actual physical contact with the wounded she's denied in other poets' depictions. Therein, a soldier is woken by Nightingale 'from a long and obscure dream of pain' by her 'dewy hand!' (4). She is real and active in this poem, not merely an inspiration. Furthermore, they predict – rightly as it turns out – that Nightingale will be the most remembered figure of the war.

> When this great noise hath rolled from off the land,
> When all those fallen Englishmen of ours
> Have bloomed and faded in Crimean flowers,
> Thy perfect charity unsoiled shall stand. (5–8)

Time may have blunted our sense of this prediction's radicalism. True, Nightingale was well known in England, but it was both audacious and prescient to imagine during the war that in 1,000 years no one would remember any soldiers, or generals, or battlefields, but would recall the competence and virtue of a single nurse. To bolster her claim that these sonnets were intended to act as souvenirs, Houston writes of this poem, 'Smith and Dobell here suggest that their sonnets will operate as a memorial still capable of affecting "pitying students" of the future' (376). But the poem does not really suggest that. When the poets compare Nightingale to a temple found among Athenian hills, by 'some pitying student of a nobler age', they are not imagining the backward glances of the future at their own work (9). Rather, they imagine that Nightingale's 'perfect charity' will simply outlast the 'great noise' of the war. The operative preposition is 'there' rather than 'here'. They claim that Nightingale's example will remain, not the poems memorialising it. When the student lingers over 'this years' half-forgotten page', which for Houston 'clearly offers a model of reading' these 'individually affecting lyrics', he shall find, according to the poem, her 'beauty smiling there' (376). 'There' references some

other page – a newspaper perhaps or a biography – not 'here', which would have been the obvious choice for such self-conscious poems, thoroughly aware of the Shakespearean sonnets' forward glances and promises of endurance.

The collection also forefronts the sacrifices made by other women, such as mothers of departed sons. Poems such as 'Childless' lament filial sacrifice, as does 'Our Mother', which abstracts to a general mother figure the agony, especially during the holidays, of the many mothers without husbands or sons returning home. Several of the poems thematise the sacrifice women made, and make, in wartime. The stark 'War' is unsparing in detail, addressing a woman directly:

> The husband from whose arms you could not part,
> Sleeps among hundreds in a bloody pit;
> The boy you nursed with fondness infinite
> Lies on the hill, a bullet through his heart.
> Bewildered Bride! mute Mother! creep apart,
> And weep yourselves away as it is fit. (1–6)

No souvenir this, nor the gothic mourner in 'The Common Grave': another weeping woman, pictured as digging with bleeding hands at the grave of some beloved.

In addition to mothers specific and general, the collection also features literary and historical women. Eve and Ruth from the Old Testament feature in 'Firelight', as does Flora Macdonald from legends of the Bonnie Prince. Mary of the Gospels features in 'Warning'; both Helena and Hermia from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* appear in 'America', and a feminised 'Freedom' drives the eponymous poem. In fact, their attention to the valour and sacrifice of Britain's women may have suggested their choice of form.

Infinite Space? An Epic in Sonnets

Perhaps Smith and Dobell would have written more traditionally patriotic or sentimental war poems if they had had the space, but sonnets are rooms too narrow for grand abstractions. The poets' dedication to them offers intimacy and detail as antidotes to the false grandeur and sublime abstraction the war suggested for other writers. Such is their commitment to detail, and to drama, that even when they write in the chief lyric form for individualism – the intimate lovers' sonnet – they turn it outward, making democratic what was the infinite kingdom of Wordsworth's foxglove bell.[6] Describing the usual function

of the sonnet collection in the era, Stephen Burt contends, 'Victorian anthologies of sonnets are full of predictably consolatory nature poems, pious resolutions, praise for friends and public figures – precisely the goals that dominated other kinds of Victorian lyric verse' (18). As I have shown, no consolation is offered in *Sonnets on the War*; rather, consolation is explicitly dismissed as impossible. Neither are public figures generally praised nor nature a consolation. In nearly every way, these poems surprise, rather than play to popular taste. Though other poets had used sonnets for political purposes in the past, they were still primarily viewed as lovers' spaces. Those revolutionaries who had so stretched the form – early Wordsworth, Percy Shelley – became heroes to the Spasmodics even while the larger culture disregarded them.

Sonnets on the War was not either of the poets' only response to the Crimean conflict. *England in Time of War* (1856) continues Dobell's exploration of mental anguish, mixing it with propaganda – battlefield ditties and newspaper reportage – but without the sonnet's formal restrictions. As is typical of Dobell's work, the poems experiment with a diversity of styles: folk songs, nursery rhymes, and impressions of Scottish dialects attempt to summarise not the experience of the war for soldiers, nurses, surgeons as in *Sonnets*, but the waiting and worrying of those at home. One poem uses the technique of incantatory repetition that Tennyson flirted with in poems like 'Mariana', and for which Dobell is infamous. In a move suitable to avant-garde theatre, Dobell's protagonist *Balder* cries out 'Ah' 13 times. Although some criticise it, I am fond of the gesture, even in its absurdity. But though it is repetitive, there is nothing absurd about the close of 'Farewell', which fittingly approximates of grief. Attempting to render families' inability to move on following loss, it reads simply:

> Farewell, Farewell
> Farewell, Farewell
> Farewell, Farewell, Farewell. (45–7)

These lines seems to me as accurate a poetic thing as can be said about death. *England in Time of War* is not quite the book that *Sonnets on the War* is, but it fared better. In a sense, Dobell was always writing about war. Although few critics mention it, giving us a poet known chiefly as friend to the Brontës, experimentalist, religious outlier, and laughing stock of 1850s *Blackwood's*, Dobell was also, always, a poet for whom Mars was muse.

Likewise, Smith wrote further on the Crimean conflict – it was clearly an important topic for him – in an iconoclastic, anti-sentimental

essay entitled 'Christmas'. First published in *The Eclectic Review* in 1860 and recollected in the his popular book of essays *Dreamthorp* (1863), Smith enunciates his version of Matthew Arnold's 'Ignorant armies clash by night' in what in the hands of a lesser writer would have been a sepia-tinged period piece.[7]

> Europe is bristling with five millions of bayonets: and this is the condition of a world for which the Son of God died eighteen hundred and sixty-two years ago! There is no mystery of Providence so inscrutable as this; and yet, is not the very sense of its mournfulness a proof that the spirit of Christianity is living in the minds of men? For, of a verity, military glory is becoming in our best thoughts a bloody rag, and conquest the first in the catalogue of mighty crimes, and a throned tyrant, with armies, and treasures, and the cheers of millions rising up like a cloud of incense around him, but a mark for the thunderbolt of Almighty God. (87)

Again, Smith destroys the nostalgic image, replacing ox and ass in what should have been a Victorian Christmas souvenir with an image of his own country as a target for divine vengeance.

Smith's anti-hawkish politics surely cost him readers. For him, failure is not the only deafening sound; 'success' likewise dampens the senses. The 'rag' of 'military glory' is limp regardless of whose blood soaks it. Striking metaphors and leftist politics like these placed Smith on the wrong side of the Victorian poetic establishment but they made him a hit with working-class readers. Though he is often accused of wide-eyed wonder, the cynicism of the essay is typical of Smith. His is the sentiment of Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum est' (1920), but 75 years earlier.

In *Edwin of Deira* (1862), Smith wrote about war again, this time in the epic strain he denied himself in *Sonnets on the War*. An account of the medieval founding of Edinburgh, the poem tends naturally toward the romance Smith knows real war lacks. But even there the poet tinges valorous imagery with the stark brutality of swords. Though the common narrative of Smith's career renders Edwin as a last gasp and total loss, some reviewers found it otherwise. Importantly, his first readers contrasted, as I have, Smith's realist depictions of war with Tennyson's and found the latter's saccharine thereafter. Smith, they claim,

> has written the best epic poem which the age of Tennyson, Longfellow, and Mrs. Browning has yet seen. By the side of *Edwin of Deira*, Tennyson's *Idylls* are pretty cabinet-pieces, and *Aurora Leigh* a nightmare medley. ('Gerald Massey and Alexander Smith' 67)

These terms are important because, essentially, when *Sonnets on the War* has been discussed, it has been treated as one of those pretty set-pieces, or as an example of the cultural logic of the souvenir, when, in fact, it stands in bold contrast thereto.

Conclusion

Are Spasmodics uniquely suited to writing war poetry? The conclusion might seem contentious, given that they are often considered to be apolitical, but it should not be.[8] Smith and Dobell were capable of minimising the space that kept the irritating details of war distant for other authors. Might not the Spasmodic school of writers, centred as it was on sensualist description, cascades of emotion, and daring metaphors possess the necessary tonal registers for wartime response? Might not these poets, ventriloquising diverse characters and dramatising even the mundane aspects of marital conflict actually create more appropriate, more humane, representations of modern warfare than Tennyson with his rhythmic confidence? As Spasmodism is concerned precisely with the individual and with an (over)abundance of poetic detail, the mode permitted a closeness to subject that led to what may be the most successful, if not the most well-known, English poems on the Crimean war. As Markovits notes, critics in the mid-Victorian period 'called for a rebirth of a modern Homer to transform the mess before them into something more exalted' (124). But, Smith and Dobell seem to ask, what if synthesising and normalising violence is not poetry's role? In their refusal to gloss over the Crimean war's 'irritating details', or to offer patriotic explanation, Smith and Dobell's collection suggests that art's primary duty might not be either to self-expression or, even in wartime, to country; it might be to tell something like the truth.

Notes

1. Alexander Smith of Glasgow.
2. Most critical responses, then and now, have focused on Dobell's *Balder* (1854).
3. Relatively, that is. The book was reviewed and extracts printed, but it received nowhere near the attention that *A Life-Drama* had.
4. *A Life-Drama* features a poet who destroys his relationship with a beloved, Violet, after which he seeks consolation in long conversations about redemption with a prostitute. The lead character in *The Roman* is a Catholic priest, urging passers-by toward renewed appreciation for their heritage and revolution.
5. Apparently dismissing the Revolutionary War.
6. From line 7 of 'Nuns Fret Not Their Convents Narrow Rooms'.
7. From line 37 of 'Dover Beach'.
8. See Richard Cronin for more on the Spasmodics being a-political.

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