

Book Review

Mary A. Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. 262pp. ISBN: 978-0-691-14407-8.

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Spanning two centuries of artistic and journalistic mediations of war, *War at a Distance* demonstrates how late eighteenth-century reactions to distant state-sponsored carnage have shaped our present-day imaginative engagements with international violence. Mary Favret sees the collective response to war fought at a distance in this period as having a lasting legacy, arguing that a new relationship with military action overseas ‘unsettled basic temporal experiences of the British population’ (11). *War at a Distance* considers how individuals understand or experience the violence of war when such violence remains beyond the direct sensory experiences of touch, smell, or hearing, out of sight and yet eerily present in the minds and daily lives of those at home.

The book’s main claim is that distance (temporal, geographical and epistemological) disorientates and detaches members of the public attempting to grasp the sublime nature of war on a global scale. As a result, a new form of everyday uncertainty and anxiety becomes part of the social fabric. However, Favret moves away from considerations of ‘the spectacular and sublime view of history or warfare’ and instead focuses upon ‘the unconsidered or the commonplace’ (21). This move enables an exploration of how Romantic writers could not imagine their world without being aware of the constant shadow cast by war; furthermore, the book grapples with the difficulty that these writers had in making the attempt to reconcile everyday reality with the conflicting ‘absent’ but ‘destructive’ reality of distant violence (159). It is argued that war becomes part of the everyday, weaving through our thoughts, influencing the contemplation of our surroundings, and becoming part of the background noise of modern life. Whether it be via images flickering in an eighteenth-century fireplace or a television set ignored in the corner of a room, the critic maintains that the experience of war is (for most) with us while also beyond us. Modern wartime imperceptibly seeps into our daily lives and eventually flows between spaces that we might wish to designate as ‘here’ or ‘there’ (4).

The book ‘takes its bearings from what may seem a singularly unlikely source, William Cowper’s *The Task*’ – a work that provided Romantic writers with the building blocks to ‘construct a complex aesthetic for modern wartime’ (22). In addition to the close attention paid to Cowper’s poem, Favret calls upon voices as diverse as Homer, Pope, Eliot, and Woolf. She also ranges through responses to war found in the work of writers such as Fawcett, Coleridge, Hazlitt, Wordsworth, Smith, Robinson, Opie, Radcliffe, Austen, Barbauld, Scott, Southey, Hemans, Byron, and Keats. In doing so, she demonstrates how violence at far remove permeates literature: an absent presence with the power to dismantle the framework of our sense of being in the world.

Favret argues that this was an obsession of British literature and art during the Great War with France (1793-1815), ‘establish[ing] forms for how we continue to think and feel about war

at a distance' (9). In this manner the critic carefully unpacks the way in which attitudes to the effects of war shift at the end of the eighteenth century, as the spectre of potentially limitless violence enters the British national psyche. But her attention is not directed to the scene of battle; instead, she 'moves from objective events to [the] subjective arena [- one] much harder to locate' (18). *War at a Distance* reflects upon how newspapers, periodicals, poetry, prints and paintings bring war home and, in doing so, become implicated in violence. The book explores print and popular visual culture in order to define this concept of modern 'wartime' - 'a mediated relationship to distant violence' (13) - which haunts the mental and physical landscape of a country at war. One might look at a newspaper report or a television news bulletin and experience a brief intensified connection with distant events; however, one also experiences the dislocating nature of this experience contained in the concept of modern wartime. This, Favret maintains, is something recognised and projected by Cowper's poem.

This discussion of 'wartime', and the various forms of temporality contained therein, is a complex interplay of ideas that attempts to unravel the knot of lived experience and the vicarious thrill of consuming distant events. These layered moments of time are shown to be the result of the disorientating effects of mediations of conflict, even as individuals attempt to orientate themselves to and within 'wartime'. The arrival of news and letters, or the reading of poetry amid the peace of an evening at home, punctuates the day in the same manner that mealtimes provide moments of pause. At the same time, the intelligence, vocabulary and moments of reflection contained (or uncontained) in these texts also puncture the peaceful everyday goings on of the home front, allowing the violence of conflict to enter private spaces. When Coleridge bemoans the breakfast amusement derived from newspaper war-reporting, in his poem 'Fears in Solitude', he is also witnessing war seeping back into society, rather than its horror merely being underplayed or pushed away. This seepage brings with it an enveloping feeling of 'anticipation and dread' (73), overshadowing the most routine of activities.

Particular attention is paid to Book IV of Cowper's *The Task* - 'The Winter Evening' - which heralds the arrival of modern wartime in the figure of the post-boy: 'the herald of the noisy world' (IV: 1-2). This boy manifests as 'an impassive figure of translation, condensation, and displacement [who] converts the war into a matter of reading' (60). Within this figure are contained 'several of the strategies for representing war which would emerge in literary production in the coming decades' (61). For Favret this work demonstrates 'how time serves as a medium [...] for making war felt'; thus, it is Cowper's poem that is recognised by writers at the end of the century as holding these new terms of reference. Indeed, the author states unequivocally that 'Cowper made war into a temporal experience: he made war into wartime' (54). At the heart of Favret's argument is the same 'affective understanding' of wartime as that found in Cowper's poem, filled as it is by 'unsettling noises' (56). Our present-day understanding of this modern adjective 'wartime' is born in the late eighteenth century's blending of distant acts of violence, media coverage, personal communications and the routines of life. In order to unravel the various paradoxes apparent in this view of mediated war, Favret calls upon theories of affect and feeling to interrogate her thesis; for example, Raymond Williams's concept of structures of feeling. Following Williams's thoughts regarding that which is left when articulation fails, the reader is asked to consider how the disturbances that punctuate Cowper's poem ('tumult', 'war', 'terrors', 'alarms', 'brazen throats') - but do not disturb the narrator ('faint echo', 'sigh', 'never tremble at the sound') - represent 'inarticulate experience' (58). War is seen and heard and not seen and not heard simultaneously.

Via examples such as these wartime is shown to be a time of ruptured perception, obscurity and dislocation, disturbing the home front in a variety of subtle ways. *War at a Distance* is written with the intent 'to trace [war's] extension throughout a culture' and to show how war at a distance 'conditions' the everyday (39-40) – leading to a different form of lived experience: 'living with held breath' (81). Complicating the notion of the public's engagement with war at a distance is not only geographical distance but also temporal distance. Favret discusses how the gap between a victory and the arrival of news regarding the event emphasised how the reader was aware of events that had occurred, but which may have been superseded during the time lag. Indeed, while a casualty list may show a loved one safe a month past it 'could not reassure you about time since' (73). This 'meantime' creates 'an anxiety' as time is 'left drifting in the nearly present (but never present enough) wartime' (74), leading to a disruption in feeling. Individuals are caught between 'anticipation' and 'living belatedly', which brings about an 'intense' but 'intensely unmoored' experience of war at a distance (74).

In a reading of Austen's *Persuasion* we learn how 'domestic realism' transmits the reality of an 'eventlessness' experienced both on the battlefield and at home: 'a fraught waiting-for-something-to-happen' (147). Favret notes how waiting in expectation is a palpable friction in texts of the time. One of the central assertions of the book, therefore, is that the concept of the 'everyday' is bequeathed to us by Romantic Period writers; it is a 'structure of modern wartime' representing a 'feeling akin to trauma' (145). This state of routine familiarity haunted by an uncanny unease leads to a powerful form of national anxiety. Romanticism, it is argued, uses this structure to convey 'in its gaps and silences an unrecoverable, absent sense of suffering' (145). Temporal disruption affects Romantic mediations of war in a manner that causes writers to look to the past, in order to grasp 'an expression of feeling that otherwise might remain inarticulate, drifting lost in the present' (76). Looking back to works like Cowper's poem other writers recognized this transformation of war experience as 'meantime'. Wartime, as experienced by combatants and civilians, home and abroad, is recognized as 'agonized waiting, rimmed round with threats of violence' (75). In this collapse of chronological understanding, a '[t]emporal vacancy' threatens, in which 'both history and future could be obliterated' (74).

In her chapter on Romanticism's deployment of 'a new weather science' and its associated vocabulary to mediate war at a distance, Favret points to the emergence of an artistic awareness of the effectiveness of atmospheric tropes to demonstrate how 'distant warfare might invade, inform, and reshape daily life' (120). While acknowledging the conjunction of weather metaphors and war through the ages, the chapter charts how late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century poets amplified this figurative relationship 'for a variety of reasons – scientific, poetic, and geopolitical' (121). This occurs because of the similarities between viewing 'the working of weather with the movement of geopolitical forces': 'global movements and local climate, devastating event and minor fluctuation'; thus, Favret claims that these metaphors offered a new understanding of the 'climate' of modern wartime' (122). Cowper's Book II of *The Task*, for example, contains 'a full-blown weather obsession' wherein climatic omens in the form of 'freakish weather' warn of 'physical, political, moral, [and] emotional' turbulence (137). Therefore, as a kind of prototype, Cowper's poem becomes important to the understanding displayed in Romantic Period literature of how disturbance is never far away in the ever-changing climate of modern politics and war. Cowper's text, and the texts that follow it, reveal 'the everyday not as a zone of peace in contrast to a distant war, but as the unspectacular register or medium of wartime' (154).

Through painstaking analytical rigour, Favret successfully communicates the thesis that the cultivation of feeling with regard to the modern perception of war begins on the home front of the late eighteenth century. She demonstrates both the dislocating nature of mediated war and the necessity for Romantic writers to re-imagine both the manner and means that the various 'temporalities' of war demand. This is a compelling and entertaining study of the haunted response to warfare experienced by the Romantic and post-Romantic imagination. At times the book itself disorientates, with phrases such as 'the immeasurable measure of the meantime of war' (73); however, this carefully constructed argument leads one to embrace such moments. *War at a Distance* will appeal to students of Cowper, Romantic literature and art, theories of affect, and those entrenched in studies of war representation and culture. It is also a book that will interest those anxiously watching the unfolding drama of present-day wars: wars that lead us to experience the same 'profoundly unsettled present' of our forebears (83). Favret's book illuminates the corners of the everyday into which distant war creeps, as we too recognise how 'definition, location [and] identity blur' (81) when witnessing war at a distance.