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'On War': De Quincey's Martial Sublime

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I _____
Wordsworth's 'Thanksgiving Ode' (1816), written in commemoration of the Allied victory at Waterloo, contains one of the most controversial and, by many nineteenth-century readers, unerringly mis-quoted passages in the poet's oeuvre:

We bow our heads before Thee,
and we laud
And magnify thy name,
Almighty God!
But thy most dreadful instrument,
In working out a pure intent,
Is Man – arrayed for mutual
slaughter, –
Yea, Carnage is thy daughter.¹

William Hazlitt, writing a review of a performance of *Coriolanus* published in December 1816 in the *Examiner*, just a few months after the appearance of Wordsworth's poem, seized upon the grammatically ambiguous closing pronouncement 'Yea, Carnage is thy daughter' as evidence of how 'the language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power'.² Hazlitt's somewhat stunned appreciation of Shakespeare's play's evocation of the seductive excitement of tyranny may therefore be understood as a veiled attempt to come to terms with

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Wordsworth's public endorsement of the triumph of 'Legitimacy'. For Hazlitt, the shock occasioned by the publication of the 'Thanksgiving Ode' makes sense if the 'principle' of poetry is conceived as *naturally* 'aristocratical', 'anti-levelling', 'dazzling' and excessive. Quoting Shakespeare and Wordsworth in succession he writes that:

It shows its head turreted, crowned, and crested. Its front is gilt and blood-stained. Before it 'it carries noise, and behind it leaves tears'. It has its altars and its victims, sacrifices, human sacrifices. Kings, priests, nobles are its train-bearers, tyrants and slaves its executioners. – 'Carnage is its [*sic*] daughter.' – Poetry is right-royal.³

Hazlitt's respectful yet clearly troubled response to Wordsworth's demonstration of the language of power was counteracted in 1819 by Shelley's savagely parodic 'Peter Bell the Third':

Then Peter wrote odes to the Devil; –
In one of which he meekly said: –
 'May Carnage and Slaughter,
 Thy niece and thy daughter,
 May Rapine and Famine,
 Thy gorge ever cramming,
 Glut thee with living and dead!'⁴

A few years later Lord Byron, less shocked and perhaps less surprised by manifestations of the Lake School poet's apostasy, recalled the

offending lines in a passage on the Battle of Waterloo in *Don Juan*:

‘Carnage’ (so Wordsworth tells you) ‘is
God’s daughter:’
If *he* speak truth, she is Christ’s sister,
and
Just now behaved as in the Holy Land.⁵

In a note to the passage Byron comments: ‘this is perhaps as pretty a pedigree for Murder as ever was found out by Garter King at Arms. – What would have been said, had any free-spoken people discovered such a lineage?’⁶ Defending Byron’s critique of Wordsworth’s lines in an essay published in *Fiction, Fair and Foul* (1880), John Ruskin would conclude that ‘the death of the innocent in battle carnage’ is not ‘His “instrument for working out a pure intent,” as Mr. Wordsworth puts it; but Man’s instrument for working out an impure one’.⁷

That Wordsworth was himself troubled by ‘Carnage is thy daughter’ is implied by the alteration of the lines in the 1845 *Poems* to the less contentious

But Man is Thy most awful instrument,
In working out a pure intent;
Thou cloth’st the wicked in their dazzling
mail,
And for thy righteous purpose they
prevail.⁸

As Ruskin’s comments suggest, however, later nineteenth-century commentators were not inclined to forget the original incarnation of these controversial lines. Thomas De Quincey offers a case in point. De Quincey’s ‘On War’, first published as the lead article in *Macphail’s Edinburgh Ecclesiastical Journal and Literary Review* in February 1848 and then republished in a revised and expanded form in *Selections Grave and Gay* (1854) during the first year of the Crimean War (1853–1856), is prefaced by an ‘Explanatory’ preface in which the author misquotes Wordsworth’s by now notorious

claim with approval, and perhaps even with relish:

Most heartily, and with my profoundest sympathy, do I go along with Wordsworth in his grand lyrical proclamation of truth not less divine than it is mysterious, not less triumphant than it is sorrowful – viz., that amongst God’s holiest instruments for the elevation of human nature, is ‘mutual slaughter’ amongst men, yes, that ‘Carnage is God’s daughter’ [*sic*] [. . .] The instruments rise in grandeur, carnage and slaughter rise in holiness, exactly as the motives and interests rise on behalf of which such awful powers are invoked. Fighting for truth in its last recesses of Sanctity, for human dignity systematically outraged, or for human rights mercilessly trodden under foot – champions of such interests, men first of all descry, as from a summit suddenly revealed, the possible grandeur of bloodshed suffered or inflicted.⁹

For De Quincey, as for Wordsworth, when blood is shed in battles ‘fought for god-like truth, for human dignity, or for human rights’ (*Works*, xx. 33), war is raised to the level of the sublime.

De Quincey’s vision of the ‘possible grandeur’ of war is compromised, however, by the puzzling declaration that ‘fortunately’ such wars are ‘of rare occurrence’:

[. . .] they are so; since, under the possible contingencies of human strength and weakness, it might else happen that the grandeur of the principle should suffer dishonour through the incommensurate means for attaining it. But such cases, though emerging rarely, are always to be reserved in men’s minds as ultimate appeals to what is most divine in man. (*Works*, xx. 32)

Here, De Quincey identifies the reasons for the peculiar disturbance presented by Wordsworth’s unflinching insistence on the

brute facticity underpinning claims to 'lofty' and 'disinterested' purpose (*Works*, xx. 33).¹⁰ For while 'mutual slaughter' may be purged of its offensive material content when elevated to the realm of 'Sanctity', this claim is qualified by the suggestion that 'the grandeur of the principle' may on occasion 'suffer dishonour through the incommensurate means for attaining it'. By acknowledging the role of contingency ('it might else happen') De Quincey becomes open to the possibility of violence rebounding on God's 'pure intent', effectively reversing the means by which 'carnage' is dignified as an instance of the sublime.

The question of how 'On War' seeks to defend itself against its own materialist insights into the incongruity of divine ends and mortal means will be the subject of the following discussion, which, in addition to tracing further De Quincey's response to Wordsworthian militancy, sets out to explore the connections between the ideological contradictions of war and the Romantic discourse of the sublime. Beginning with a brief account of the intellectual and historical contexts that informed the composition of De Quincey's essay, my argument goes on to situate 'On War' within a larger tradition of writing concerned with the relations between conflict, identity and the sublime. Finally, through a close analysis of an important addition to the original article of 1848, this essay will suggest that the revised version of 'On War' marks a significant turn in De Quincey's life-long struggle to come to terms with what might be called the vexed euphoria of war – a self-baffling trope that stands, in many ways, for the impossibility of synthesising blood and sanctity.

II _____

De Quincey's fascination with conflict may be traced back to the early months of the

Peninsular War (1808–1814) when, spurred on by Wordsworth, the aspiring writer was encouraged to take an interest in the communication of overseas 'intelligence'. The significance of the older poet's 'insatiable appetite' for news from abroad has been discussed in detail by Margaret Russett,¹¹ but here it should be noted that the apocalyptic vision of 'tidings, fitted to convulse all nations' that De Quincey eulogises in his anonymous 1849 *Blackwood's Magazine* article 'The English Mail-Coach' (*Works*, xvi. 417), subsequently revised and republished alongside 'On War' in *Selections Grave and Gay*, may be read as an attempt to think through a 'series of associations': that war news, like opium, is 'addicting'; that dependence on the thrills afforded by news of military victories corrodes the 'boundaries of the self' and that 'national euphoria is alloyed with a barely acknowledged but ever-emerging collective guilt at the sacrifices such pleasure requires'.¹² In 'The English Mail-Coach' De Quincey's exploration of the conceptual antimonies of pleasure and pain informing war addiction culminates in the final 'Dream-Fugue' with a millenarian vision of concord in which the child of war is delivered from death by the angel of love. Yet the promise of 'endless resurrections' implies the necessity of 'endless sacrifices': the nation's investment in the vicissitudes of peace and war, like the individual's investment in the pleasures and pains of opium eating, is interminable.¹³

In 'On War' De Quincey's psychological investment in the perpetuation of sacrifice is granted conceptual respectability by way of the philosophical doctrine of necessitarianism. The essay's definition of conflict as 'a physical necessity arising out of man's nature when combined with man's situation' and as 'moral necessity [...] under which it becomes lawful to say that war *ought* to exist, as a balance to opposite tendencies of a still more evil character' (*Works*, xvi. 271) owes much to Kant, whose essays on 'Perpetual Peace' and

'Idea for a Universal History' De Quincey had translated in the mid- to late 1820s.¹⁴ Echoing Kant's pessimistic sense of antagonism as the lamentable but necessary means which nature employs to accomplish the advancement of human society, De Quincey states provocatively that 'like other scourges in the divine economy, war purifies and redeems itself in its character of a counterforce to greater evils that could not otherwise be intercepted or redressed'. The destructive horror of war must be countenanced, he continues, on the grounds that it serves as a 'balance to opposite tendencies of a still more evil character' (*Works*, xvi. 272). Among the evils that De Quincey itemises in his 'Explanatory' preface are the Peace Societies which would if 'their power kept pace with their guilty purposes, work degradation for man by drawing upon his most effeminate and luxurious cravings for ease' (*Works*, xx. 31). For De Quincey, again implicitly referring to Kant, the moral integrity of the nation, like that of the individual, occurs through conflict. Paradoxically it is only through participation in ceaseless antagonism with others that individuals and nations may secure a coherent sense of identity.¹⁵

De Quincey's remarks on the connections between war and identity were echoed elsewhere in debates in the run-up to the Crimean War. In November 1852, two months after the Duke of Wellington's death and thirty-seven years after the Battle of Waterloo, an anonymous writer in *Blackwood's* set about bemoaning the effects of the prolonged state of peace: where once a nation affirmed its strength on the field of battle, now it sets to dreaming; where once a nation distinguished itself in battle, now it is characterised by 'a studied contempt of loyalty—a bitter hatred of the aristocracy [...] a loud systematic derision of courage, self-devotion, and patriotism—an identifying of national honour with national wealth—a dogged pursuing of self-interest—a habit of considering ease and comfort as the

summum bonum'.¹⁶ The writer goes on to decry those 'lounging pleasantly on prize sofas from the Great Exhibition [while] reading the story of [Wellington's] Campaigns [...] There would have been more of life in that hour of Waterloo—more self-knowledge—more awakening of noble faculties in your soul [...] than in a long and wrinkling course of remunerative Mammon-worship'. This, the writer observes, with a glance towards Arnold, is 'an unheroic age'.¹⁷ For *Blackwood's* the epitome of the 'unheroic' age is the Manchester manufacturer, Liberal MP, peace activist, and advocate of free-market capitalism, Richard Cobden. Cobden, who had played an active role in the international peace congresses of the late 1840s, and who introduced into the House of Commons a motion calling for the formation of treaties by which disputes could be adjudicated by impartial arbitrators (a motion that was defeated in 1849), had argued vociferously against the pessimistic view of war as a necessary evil. Claiming that war was against the interests of European mercantile society Cobden went on to court controversy as a fierce critic of British intervention in the Crimea. When looking, for instance, at Britain's commercial links with Russia and Turkey he compares the expanding nature of Anglo-Russian commerce with the limited scale of business with Turkey. Put simply, war against Russia makes bad financial sense.¹⁸

The *Blackwood's* writer's critique of Cobden's pacifism, which regards international diplomacy, legislation, and trade as the antidotes to barbarity, finds an analogue in De Quincey's 'On War', which offers, by way of an attack on the universalising tendencies of the commercial spirit, a rigorous defence of national self-interest:

Every nation's duty, first, midst, and last, is to itself. No nation can be safe from continual (because insensible) losses of ground, but by continual jealousies,

watchings, and ambitious strivings to mend its own position. Civilities and high-bred courtesies pass and ought to pass between nations; *that* is the graceful drapery which shrouds their natural, fierce, and tiger-like relations to each other. But the glaring eyes, which express this deep and inalienable ferocity, look out at intervals from below those gorgeous draperies [...] (*Works*, xvi. 277)

The idea that war can be abolished through an act of political will appears to De Quincey to be not only 'romantic' (*Works*, xx. 31), but also atavistic. For, he argues, 'Banish war as now administered, and it will revolve upon us in a worse shape, that is, in a shape of predatory and ruffian war, more and more licentious' (*Works*, xvi. 279). In anticipation of Freud's theorising in his 1933 essay 'Why War?' De Quincey regards hostility towards others as a safety valve for the discharge of internal violence, a defence against the return to some more 'lawless guerrilla state' of war. Were war to be forbidden, he continues, 'the only result of that prohibition would be to throw back the exercise of war from national into private and mercenary hands; and *that* is precisely the retrograde or inverted course of civilisation' (*ibid.*). War, therefore, is intrinsic to civilisation. As civilisation progresses, so war is 'exalted [...] from a horrid trade of butchery into a magnificent and enlightened science [...] cleansed from all horrors except those which [...] no longer stand out as reproaches to [man's] humanity' (*Works*, xvi. 288).

In the revised 1854 essay, having cited 'Carnage is his [*sic*] daughter' (*Works*, xvi. 279) in support of the 'dreadful doctrine' that war is 'amongst the evils that are salutary to man', De Quincey concludes that war has a deep and 'ineffable relation to [man's] hidden sanctities' (*Works*, xvi. 278). Picking up on his earlier comments on the transformation of war into an 'exalted' science he commends war as 'an organ

of respiration – for breathing a transcendent atmosphere, and dealing with an idea that else would perish – viz., the idea of mixed crusade and martyrdom, doing and suffering, that finds its realization in a battle such as that of Waterloo' (*Works*, xvi. 708). When this claim is read alongside the concluding section of 'The English Mail-Coach' it becomes clear that De Quincey is seeking, like Wordsworth before him, to present Waterloo as the battle to end all battles, the apocalyptic finale to the endless cycle of victory and defeat that constitutes the pattern of human history. That Waterloo cannot put an end to the ceaseless violence of national realisation, that in Timothy Ziegenhagen's words, the 'thrillings' of war, 'like an addictive drug [...] require a continuance of the bloodshed' is, nevertheless, the message that 'On War' drives home with remorseless insistence.¹⁹

III _____

So far we have seen how 'On War', no less than 'The English Mail-Coach', endeavours to sustain the distance from the abject matter of death that enables war to become an object of sublime delight. Later on we shall see how a belated encounter with war's 'incommensurate means' leads De Quincey towards acknowledging the failure point of his neo-Kantian, providential vision of the just war. For now, however, we must broaden the focus of this enquiry to consider some of the earlier, pre-Kantian intellectual currents that bear on De Quincey's conception of war as sublime.

The origins of the high Romantic view of war, a view that could be said to reach its apogee in Wordsworth's designation of Waterloo as 'victory sublime', can be traced back to Longinus's first-century treatise *Peri hypsous* or *On the Sublime*. Throughout his treatise Longinus maintains that the sublime is fundamentally antagonistic in structure: it 'exerts an irresistible force and mastery'; it

'get[s] the upper hand with every hearer'; 'a well-timed stroke of sublimity scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and in a flash reveals the full power of the speaker'.²⁰ Most notably, the sublime gives the impression of being 'shot from a catapult' (*On the Sublime*, 131). When Longinus wishes to illustrate the sublimity produced by certain rhetorical figures, more often than not he analyses passages which focus on conflict. Here, for example, is his discussion of the use of asyndeton, anaphora, and diatyposis in a speech by Demosthenes: 'By his manner, his looks, his voice, when [the aggressor] acts with insolence [...] he acts with hostility [...] he strikes you with his fists [...] he strikes you like a slave'. In this way, writes Longinus, 'the orator does just the same as the aggressor; he belabours the judges' minds with blow after blow' (*On the Sublime*, 129–30).

Elsewhere, however, the rhetoric of violence threatens to exceed the control of the orator, as this example, which Longinus takes from the *Iliad*, makes clear:

And vast also are the images [Homer] conjures up for the Battle of the Gods:

And round them rolled the trumpet-tones of the wide heavens and of Olympus. And down in the underworld Hades, monarch of the realm of the shades, leapt up from his throne and cried aloud in dread, lest the earth-shaker Poseidon thereafter should cleave the earth apart, and reveal to the gaze of mortals and immortals alike those grim and festering abodes which the very gods look upon with abhorrence.

You see, my friend, how the earth is split from its foundations upwards, how Tartarus itself is laid bare, how the whole universe is turned upside down and torn apart, and everything alike, heaven and hell, things mortal and immortal, shares in the conflict and peril of the combat.

And yet, awe-inspiring as these things are, from another aspect, if they are not taken as allegory, they are altogether ungodly, and do not preserve our sense of what is fitting. In his accounts of the wounds suffered by the gods [...] Homer seems to me to have done everything in his power to make gods of the men fighting at Troy, and men of the gods [...] far superior to the passages upon the Battle of the Gods are those which represent the divine nature as it really is, pure and undefiled [...] (*On The Sublime*, 123)

When gods, or noble souls, look too closely at the abject matter of the world they risk a descent into the 'festering abodes' of men. The gods move, in other words, from the Aristotelian realm of knowledge and understanding, a realm which Longinus associates with the delineating effects of 'allegory', to the chaos and confusion of chiasmus: gods as men, men as gods. No longer 'pure and undefiled', the gods, too, in marked anticipation of what De Quincey has to say about the relations between the 'carnage' and 'pure intent' of war, may be subject to the shocking or wounding effects of war.

But what exactly has been revealed in this passage? Commenting on a speech by the orator Demosthenes, Longinus states that a 'rhetorical figure would appear to be the most effective when the fact that it is not a figure is most apparent'. The example he gives, from Demosthenes's *De Corona* ('On the Crown'), is a passage that makes explicit reference to war: 'By those of you who stood the shock at Marathon, it cannot be that you were wrong'. Via apostrophe, Longinus notes, Demosthenes 'has instilled into his [audience] the spirit of the men who stood there in the forefront of the danger' so that 'they come to feel as proud of the war against Philip as of the triumph at Marathon' (*On the Sublime*, 125). But as Longinus continues, the sublimity of the passage is dependent on Demosthenes's ability

to conceal his use of the rhetorical figure. And how exactly is this concealment achieved? 'Obviously', Longinus concludes, 'by its very brilliance. For in much the same way as dim lights vanish in the radiance of the sun, so does the all-pervading effluence of grandeur utterly obscure the artifices of rhetoric' (*On the Sublime*, 127). Since, as Neil Hertz points out, the method of concealment is 'itself a figure, a simile using the language of light and darkness', Longinus is unable to sustain his sense of the transcendental purity of the sublime: it too is subject to a form of materiality, in this case to the ineluctable materiality of language.²¹ Significantly, Longinus goes on to associate language with what he calls 'the sordid and contemptible' nature of the body, and in a later chapter he argues that just as nature conceals 'the private parts' of the body, 'so as not to sully the beauty of the whole figure', so sublimity works to hide its shameful dependence on the stuff of language (*On the Sublime*, 155).

But the sublime is, nevertheless, dependent on language. As Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla have suggested, Longinus is the first to acknowledge the idea that sublimity does not inhere in objects and events but is rather a product of the transformational power of discourse.²² Thus, writing on hyperbole, Longinus quotes Isocrates to the effect that 'words have such power that they can make what is grand humble, and endow petty things with greatness'. The idea that even the 'humble' may be raised to the status of the sublime via the power of language is sustained in post-Longinian discourses of the sublime, most notably in Dennis, Addison, and Baillie. Thus, Addison famously claims in *The Spectator*, that through the power of words, even a 'hideous' object such as a 'Dunghill' may be transformed into a sublime object.²³ We have seen, however, via Longinus's frustration with the Homeric battle of the gods, how easy it is to reverse this trajectory, so that pleasure descends from the

heights of representation to the mundane reality of the thing. Just as Demosthenes disguises his use of apostrophe through the dazzling grandeur of his rhetoric, so, in the case of Isocrates, hyperbole must 'conceal the fact' that it is a hyperbole (*On the Sublime*, 149). Expose this materiality and the sublime collapses into the 'festering' body of the world.

In 'The English Mail-Coach' De Quincey places related stress on Waterloo as a principle of light: 'The dreadful word shone by its own light; before us it went; high above our leader's heads it rode, and spread a golden light over the paths which we traversed'. In pointed allusion to John 1: 5 the bright effulgence of Waterloo allows 'darkness' to finally 'comprehend' the purpose of blood sacrifice (*Works*, xvi. 446). In 'On War', as previously noted, war conceived as 'a magnificent and enlightened science' conspires with the 'permanent light of civilisation [...] to steal over the bloody shambles of buccaneering warfare' (*Works*, xvi. 288), overmastering corporeal obscurity with radiant rationality. We will see in the concluding section to this essay how, as a result of the reversal of this outcome, De Quincey comes to identify with the victims of sublime violence, but for now it should be noted that the transcendental solution to the self-subverting ironies of the Longinian or rhetorical sublime clearly owes a great deal to Kant. In the *Critique of Judgement* (1789), as is well known, the sublime is presented as a contest between the limited, sensory grasping of imagination and the unlimited transcendental powers of reason. At the end of this contest the defeat of imagination in the face of the ineffable, the infinite and the awe-inspiring is the sacrifice that must be paid in order to establish the existence of a superior faculty within the mind of man.²⁴ De Quincey's theorising of war as a 'necessity' that 'towers by means of its moral relations into the region of our impassioned exaltations' (*Works*, xvi. 272), effectively

detaching itself from the encumbrances of corporeal understanding, is anticipated in Kant's assertion that 'war has something sublime about it' providing it is carried on in 'an orderly way and with respect for the sanctity of the citizen's rights'.²⁵ War for Kant is sublime because the struggle of a people in the face of danger mimics the way in which reason stands its ground in the encounter with excessive magnitude and power. Yet, if war becomes too closely identified with the realm of sensations it becomes 'barbaric' and can no longer be considered a pure Idea. Kant expands on this theme in section 48 of the *Critique*:

Fine art shows its superiority precisely in this, that it describes things beautifully that in nature we would dislike or find ugly. The Furies, diseases, devastations of war, and so on are all harmful; and yet they can be described, or even presented in a painting, very beautifully. There is only one kind of ugliness that cannot be presented in conformity with nature without obliterating all aesthetic liking and hence artistic beauty: that ugliness which arouses *disgust*. For in that strange sensation, which rests on nothing but imagination, the object is presented as if it insisted, as it were, on our enjoying it even though that is just what we are forcefully resisting; and hence the artistic presentation of the object is no longer distinguished in our sensation from the nature of this object itself, so that it cannot possibly be considered beautiful. The art of sculpture, too, has excluded from its creations any direct presentation of ugly objects, since in its products art is almost confused with nature. Instead it has permitted [ugly objects] to be presented by an allegory – e.g., death ([by] a beautiful genius) or a warlike spirit ([by] Mars) – or by attributes that come across as likeable, and hence has permitted them only to be presented indirectly and by means of an

interpretation of reason rather than presented for a merely aesthetic power of judgement. (*Critique*, 180)

As with Longinus's comments on the battle of the gods, 'allegory' is cited by Kant in opposition to 'the direct presentation' of the 'ugly'. Focus too closely on the loathsome corporeality of war, so the argument runs, and the result is chaos.

Somehow, the violence of the sublime must be subordinated to some form of civilising principle. Certainly, Kant seems to believe that war may act as 'an incentive' for the growth of 'culture'. 'Though war', he argues, 'is an intentional human endeavour (incited by our unbridled passions), yet it is also a deeply hidden and perhaps intentional endeavour of the supreme wisdom, if not to establish, then at least to prepare the way for lawfulness' (*Critique*, 320). Elsewhere he asserts, in advance of De Quincey, that war may be beneficial, since 'a prolonged peace [...] tends to make prevalent a mere commercial spirit, and along with it base selfishness, cowardice, and softness, and to debase the thinking of that people' (*Critique*, 122). This way of justifying war within the context of the sublime is nothing new. In *On the Sublime*, for example, Longinus struggles with the relations between sublime 'violence' and the civil requirements of 'service and utility'. In the end, Longinus concludes that sublimity has an ethical dimension, arguing that while, in conventional terms, it may be better to act as well as to write free from 'blame', the risk-taking impulse of the sublime preserves a social function insofar as it exists to prevent men from becoming 'slaves to [luxury]' (*On the Sublime*, 158).

War, then, is at the heart of the sublime. With its stress on striking and shocking, its emphasis on internal conflict and division, and the fact that it is often depicted as a remedy for the deleterious effects of commercial society, war, as it emerges in Longinus, Kant and De

Quincey, operates both as a principle of elevation and as an agent of destruction. But while the idea of war may well solicit the 'sympathy' of a people, inspiring a nation to conceive itself as engaged in a mission to attain a noble purpose, when attention turns to its real object, the dead and wounded body, then war is described as ugly, festering, barbaric, or disgusting. As such, this object has the power to obfuscate the light of sublime rhetoric, reducing it to a mordant preoccupation with its own internal constitution.

IV _____

It is at this point and by way of a conclusion that I wish to return to the treatment of war and the sublime in 'On War'. In the 'Explanatory' preface of 1854 De Quincey inserts a long footnote in which he attempts to counter the 'ordinary view' that in the Old Testament warfare is conducted with a 'severity approaching to cruelty' (*Works*, xx. 32). De Quincey has at his disposal the recently published findings of the archaeologist Austen Henry Layard (1817–1894), whose endeavours to best the French in the competition to claim the spoils of the Near East may be understood as a continuation of contemporary imperial struggle by cultural means. In 1849 the publication of Layard's 'sensationally successful' *Ninevah and its Remains* marked a period of extraordinary British interest and activity in the Turco-Persian region during which the boundary between the pursuits of disinterested scientific inquiry and political self-advancement became increasingly blurred.²⁶ The historian Holger Hoock points out that reviews of the work 'praised the biblical historicity' of Layard's research 'and made spiritual claims to the region to justify Britain's imperial presence in the Middle East'.²⁷ It was, however, Layard's subsequent major publication, *Discoveries in the Ruins of Ninevah and Babylon* (1853) that prompted De

Quincey to speculate further on the troubling role of violence in securing higher, national purposes:

In the last work of Mr. Layard ('Layard ('Discoveries in the Ruins of Ninevah and Babylon, 1853'), are published some atrocious monuments of the Assyrian cruelty in the treatment of military captives. In one of the plates of Chap. xx., at page 456, is exhibited some unknown torture applied to the head; and in another, at page 458, is exhibited the abominable process, applied to two captives, of flaying them alive. (*Works*, xx. 32)

The scenes from the bas-reliefs at Ninevah depicted in these plates (fig.1) do indeed depict some hideous instances of torture. And Layard's description is quite explicit:

Two were stretched naked at full length on the ground, and whilst their limbs were held apart by pegs and cords they were being flayed alive. Beneath them were other unfortunate victims undergoing abominable punishments. The brains of one were apparently being beaten out with an iron mace, whilst an officer held him by the beard. A torturer was wrenching the tongue out of the mouth of a second wretch who had been pinioned to the ground. The bleeding heads of the slain were tied round the necks of the living who seemed reserved for still more barbarous tortures.²⁸

The victims, Layard notes, are 'distinguished [...] by a very marked Jewish countenance [...] Could they have belonged', he speculates, 'to the Hebrew tribes [...] who, having become powerful in their new settlements, had revolted against their Assyrian rulers, and were once again subdued?'²⁹

What concerns De Quincey is the unfortunate possibility of Assyrian martial practices being adopted by the Israelites in the

Assyrians flaying their Prisoners alive, and carrying away Heads of the Slain (Kouyunjik).

Assyrians torturing their Captives (Kouyunjik)

Figure 1. (top). Assyrians torturing their Captives (Kouyunjik). University of Leicester Library. (bottom) Assyrians flaying their Prisoners alive, and carrying Away Heads of the Slain (Kouyunjik). Plates reproduced in Henry Austen Layard, *Discoveries in the Ruins of Ninevah and Babylon, with Travels in Armenia, Kurdistan and the Desert: Being the Result of a Second Expedition Undertaken for the Trustees of the British Museum* (London, 1853). © University of Leicester Library.

pursuit of holy ends. And the inclusion of this meditation, at a key stage in the argument, runs the risk of collapsing all that has been said thus far on behalf of the sublimity of the just war. Just as, in Longinus, the structure of the sublime collapses when the gods gaze into the festering abysses of the underworld, so in De Quincey the contemplation of a shared culture of barbarism severely undermines his attempts to claim that in Holy War bloodshed is sublated in the idea of 'the true and transcendent spirit of mercy' (*Works*, xx. 32). In a study of De Quincey's development of the sublime in his

three satirical essays 'On Murder' of 1827, 1839 and 1854 Steven Vine has claimed that De Quincey is often drawn into betraying unwitting sympathy with the 'obliterated' victims of 'sublime violence', arguing that while the murderer appears at first to be a potent 'avatar of the Burkian and Kantian sublimities of terror and awe' his 'excessive affirmation of subjective agency in a historical situation of democratisation and modernisation [...] increasingly undermines that agency'.³⁰ In the same way that De Quincey in his dealings with Kant appears moved to align himself with

the benighted visions of defeated imagination rather than with the exalted prospects of triumphal reason so, in the essays on murder and, by extension, in his writings on war he is led to a point of identification with the violated bodies of 'merciful bloodshed' (*Works*, xx. 32).

In the end, however, De Quincey states that he is 'convinced that Moses must have interfered most peremptorily and determinately, and not merely by verbal ordinances, but by establishing counter-usages, against this spirit of barbarity; otherwise it would have increased contagiously; whereas we meet with no such hellish atrocities amongst the children of Israel' (*ibid.*). In a further reminder of the labile relations between words and things exposed by Longinian thinking on the sublime, De Quincey acknowledges that language, if it is to serve as a medium for the establishment of truth, requires the supplementary labour of 'counter-usages'. While, in 'The English Mail-Coach', Waterloo had served as the bearer of the divine Word, sufficient to bring the senseless march of human conflict to an apocalyptic end, 'On War' points instead to the role of Mosaic law in maintaining a check on barbarism. Even as Waterloo is held up as the embodiment of the 'transcendent [...] idea of mixed crusade and martyrdom' said to characterise the just or holy war (*Works*, xvi. 708), the footnote acknowledges that repetition not teleology governs the course of human history; that war crimes, like words, are not halted by the Word but are only, at the very most, kept in check by deeds.

The closing sentence of the revised essay brings with it a reminder of De Quincey's engagement with 'Wordsworth's bold doctrine of war' (*Works*, xx. 31). Surveying 'the dreadful field' of Waterloo, 'man's tutelary angel [...] reads the distorted features, counts the ghastly ruins, sums the hidden anguish, and the harvests "Of horror breathing from the silent ground"'. The quotation, taken from

Wordsworth's poem 'After Visiting the Field of Waterloo' (1820), states more broadly, as if by way of apology for the crass sententiousness of 'Carnage is thy daughter':

[...] we felt as men *should* feel
With such vast hoards of hidden carnage
near;
And horror breathing from the silent
ground.³¹

Despite the tortuous attempts to bless despoliation as 'very good' and for all its strenuous endeavours to read war as a holy or elevated pursuit, 'On War' succumbs, in the end, to the cumulative effects of horror. Wordsworth's and De Quincey's encounter with the stultifying illegibility of war's 'silent ground' may, nevertheless, be considered a victory of sorts over the chilling abstractions of the Kantian sublime; for it is only by succumbing to the infinite recoil of imagination that carnage may be prevented from attaining the status of a supersensible Idea.

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NOTES

1. 'Thanksgiving Ode', 274–82. *Shorter Poems, 1807–1820*, ed. Carl Ketcham (Ithaca, New York and London, 1989), 188. Henceforth *Shorter Poems* followed by page and line numbers.
2. *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe (21 vols, London, 1930–4), iv. 347–8.
3. *Ibid.*
4. 'Peter Bell the Third', 634–40. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (London and New York, 1977), 343–4.
5. *Don Juan*, VIII. ix. 70–2. *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann and Barry Weller (7 vols, Oxford, 1980–93), v. 367.
6. *Ibid.*, 732.
7. *The Literary Criticism of John Ruskin*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, 1965), 371–3.
8. 'Thanksgiving Ode', 106–9. *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (5 vols, Oxford, 1940–9), iii. 155. Henceforth *Poetical Works* followed by volume and page number.

9. *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Grevel Lindop *et al.* (21 vols, London, 2003), xx. 31. Henceforth *Works* followed by volume and page number.
10. Carl Ketcham argues that 'Wordsworth, never one to shrink from an effect because it is startling, halts his readers in mid-celebration, forcing them to inspect the total implications of their rejoicing'. See *Shorter Poems*, 16. See also Philip Shaw, *Waterloo and the Romantic Imagination* (Houndmills, 2002), 145.
11. Margaret Russett, 'De Quincey's Romanticism: Canonical Minority and the Forms of Transmission' (Cambridge, 1997), 68–70.
12. See Timothy Ziegenhagen, 'War Addiction in Thomas De Quincey's *The English Mail-Coach*', *Wordsworth Circle*, 35.2 (2004), 93–8; 94.
13. *Ibid.* 96.
14. See Robert Hopkins, 'De Quincey on War and the Pastoral Design of *The English Mail-Coach*', *Studies in Romanticism*, 6.3 (1967), 129–51, 130–3. Henceforth Hopkins followed by page number.
15. For further commentary on the role of antagonism in individual and national self-fashioning see Michael J. Shapiro, *Violent Cartographies: Mapping Cultures of War* (Minneapolis, 1997), 41–3. For an account of De Quincey's 'On War' as an allegory of violent individuation see Daniel Pick, *War Machine: The Rationalisation of Slaughter in the Modern Age* (New Haven, CT, and London, 1993), 60–4. Henceforth Pick followed by page number.
16. Anonymous, 'A Moral from Walmer', *Blackwood's Magazine*, 72.445 (November 1852), 630–3, 631.
17. *Ibid.*, 632, 630.
18. For discussion of Cobden and the Peace Societies see Martin Ceadel, *The Origins of War Prevention: The British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1730–1854* (Oxford and New York, 1996), 414–69. See also Hopkins, 130–1, and Pick, 19–27.
19. Ziegenhagen, 'War Addiction in Thomas De Quincey's *The English Mail-Coach*', 98.
20. Longinus, *On the Sublime*, in *Classical Literary Criticism*, ed. and trans. T. S. Dorsch (Harmondsworth, 1965), 100. Henceforth *On the Sublime* followed by page number.
21. Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York, 1985), 17.
22. *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla (Cambridge, 1996), 11.
23. *The Spectator*, 418 (30 June 1712). *The Spectator*, ed. Gregory Smith (4 vols, London and New York, 1958), iii. 297.
24. Paul de Man describes Kant's sublime as a 'scene of combat [...] violence and battle'. See 'Phenomenology and Materiality in Kant', in *Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects*, ed. Gary Shapiro and Alan Sica (Amherst, 1984), 121–44, 131.
25. *Critique of Judgement*, ed. and trans. Walter S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, 1987), 122. Henceforth *Critique* followed by page number.
26. Holger Hoock, *Empires of the Imagination: Politics, War, and the Arts in the British World, 1750–1850* (London, 2010), 262.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Austen Henry Layard, *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon* (London, 1853), 456.
29. *Ibid.* For further discussion of the freezes and the rhetoric of sublimity in Assyrian battle narratives see Cynthia R. Chapman, 'Sculpted Warriors: Sexuality and the Sacred in the Depiction of Warfare in the Assyrian Palace Reliefs and in Ezekiel 23:14–17', *lectio difficilior*, 1 (2007): <http://www.lectio.unibe.ch>. See also Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *The Forms of Violence: Narrative in Assyrian Art and Modern Culture* (New York, 1985) and Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Philadelphia, 2003).
30. Steven Vine, '"Intermitting Power": De Quincey's Sublime Identifications', *Prose Studies*, 30.2 (2008), 142–58, 144.
31. 'After Visiting the Field of Waterloo', 12–14, *Poetical Works*, iii. 167.