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Reading the Victorian Souvenir:
Sonnets and Photographs of the Crimean War

The prevalence and popularity of the sonnet—rule bound and freighted with historical and national associations—throughout the Victorian period, when many poets were exploring unrhymed and less structured forms, invites exploration as to why and how Victorian poets and readers would turn to an old form to represent and understand their self-consciously modern experience. Although the amatory sonnet sequences by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Meredith, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti are today perhaps the best known examples of Victorian sonnet writing, those famous works are in fact exceptions to the great number of sonnets published during the period, many of which were not published in sequences and which tended to focus on descriptions of landscape and especially scenes of travel; portraits of famous people, friends, and family; moral or political reflections on specific events or issues; and moments from everyday life.¹ Victorian poets and readers understood that these contemporary uses for the sonnet form were substantially different from the Renaissance amatory sequences addressed to an idealized beloved:

A word may be said as to the uses and advantages of the sonnet. It is capital for embalming the moods of a moment—those sentiments and feelings which contain a sort of completeness in themselves. It forms an admirable setting for a beautiful prospect, a noble act, a splendid character, whereby they may be contemplated again in miniature, as it were, when their outward form is no longer with us.²

William Davies's 1873 essay concisely expresses the two main functions for the sonnet form that underlie all of its popular Victorian subgenres: description and memorialization. The sonnet's condensed unity of expression combined with Victorian assumptions of its autobiographical truth to make it ideal for recording specific moments of time and their accompanying thoughts and emotions.³ The care and precision required to craft a sonnet added value to each word, and meant that the sonnet offered only significant details to its readers.⁴ In descriptive poetry, such focus on detail combined with the temporal memorializing function to make the sonnet form seem appropriate, for Victorian readers like Davies, as a way to capture a scene or moment for later use.⁵ Davies describes the sonnet as an embalmed

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piece of history, a miniature artifact to be contemplated as the record of the “completeness” of a discrete moment. Such discrete moments of the poet’s experience can thus be transmitted to the reader through the sonnet form. The “uses and advantages” of the sonnet, here expressed in functional, rather than literary terms, begin to open up the social meaning of the form, or more specifically, its relation to the historical moment of its writers and readers. To approach that social meaning and thereby defamiliarize the sonnet from its traditional literary history of influence (Shakespeare—Milton—Wordsworth), I propose reading the Victorian sonnet and Victorian photography as analogous technologies of representation.⁶ Photography and the sonnet were used to represent the same events and objects and were discussed in similar ways by Victorian critics. Because of photography’s abiding relation to our own period, its ability to preserve a moment is perhaps more obvious than that of the sonnet. Reading the rhetoric of the two forms together can help us see the modernity of the Victorian sonnet—namely how it could, like the photograph, circulate as a commodified moment of perception.

For this discussion, my texts are taken from the numerous discourses surrounding the Crimean War, which can be understood as the first truly modern British war, despite the chivalric models of warfare embodied in its dandy officers. Orders were communicated by telegraph, St. Petersburg was protected by the first naval minefield, and plans for the use of poison gas were considered. Most importantly, the Crimean war was the first war to be covered by the press, including William Howard Russell’s reports in *The Times* and engravings in *The Illustrated London News* taken from William Simpson’s war sketches and Roger Fenton’s photographs. Russell’s reports exposed the governmental mismanagement that left the troops ill-supplied for the long siege of Sebastopol and contributed to England’s terrible losses in the Crimea, which were mostly from disease, rather than from combat casualties. The power of journalistic reporting became clear as the general public called for relief shipments to the troops and eventually caused the resignation of Lord Aberdeen’s government. The Crimean War became a grand national spectacle observed through Russell’s metaphoric writing that involved even those with no direct personal ties to the soldiers.⁷

In response to the swell of public opinion, British poets and artists produced a great number of patriotic works dealing with the Crimea. Most of these are today forgotten, except perhaps for Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade.”⁸ As public support for the war dwindled towards its conclusion and thereafter, Tennyson’s, and other artists’, enthusiasm for the war despite its horrors soon came to be seen as an embarrassment.⁹ One of the most interesting poetic responses to the war is a small book published by David Bogue early in

1855 and priced at one shilling: *Sonnets on the War* by Alexander Smith and Sydney Dobell. To understand why and how Smith and Dobell used the sonnet form to document this most modern of events, I compare their book to some of the war's more famous representations, Tennyson's "Charge" and the photographs taken by Roger Fenton. The congruent cultural impulses inhabiting Victorian sonnets and photography are manifested in this instance as a kind of memorialization of public events that re-forms them into private possessions or souvenirs. In reading Smith and Dobell's sonnets with Fenton's photographs, I am not arguing for any direct line of influence: the sonnets were published in January 1855, and Fenton did not leave for the Crimea until February of that year. Rather, I want to suggest that Smith and Dobell's sonnets performed similar functions for their original audience as did Fenton's photographs. The documentary and memorializing operations of their sonnets reveal some of the distinctive Victorian uses for the sonnet form to capture important moments of public and private experience.

I

When news of the charge of the Light Cavalry Brigade on 25 October 1854 reached England two weeks later, patriotic observers of the war's progress were left to wonder at the "splendid self-sacrifice" with the leader in *The Times* on 13 November: "Two great armies, composed of four nations, saw from the slopes of a vast amphitheatre seven hundred British cavalry proceed at a rapid pace, and in perfect order, to certain destruction. Such a spectacle was never seen before, and we trust will never be repeated."¹⁰ The two cavalry charges of 25 October took place in a valley, with Turkish cannon stations along the hills on either side. Early in the morning, the Russians advanced, taking several of these redoubts, and several British heavy cavalry divisions helped to turn the Russians back. As the Russians retreated to one end of the valley, they drew up six divisions of cavalry, with six infantry battalions in line behind them, and 30 cannon along the line, with more infantry on the hills nearby. As the British rejoiced over this victory, Quartermaster-General Brigadier Airey gave Captain Nolan of the 15th Hussars an order to take to Lord Lucan to advance his cavalry nearer to the enemy. The cavalry in general, and Nolan in particular, had resented the decision to restrain the cavalry units in previous battles. According to Russell, Lucan asked where he should advance to and Nolan reportedly said "There are the enemy, and there are the guns, sir, before them; it is your duty to take them."¹¹ Lucan passed the order on to Lord Cardigan and the other leaders of the cavalry.

As crowds of British and allied troops watched from the flanking hills, the Light Cavalry advanced down the valley and marched into the line of 30 cannon as Russian musketry and rifles shot at them from the hills. Suffering terrible losses, they just kept going, attacking the gunners with sabres. As they finally turned to retreat, Russian Lancers attacked from the flank, and as the two nations' cavalry fought in the valley, Russian gunners shot at them all, killing their own men as well, in what Russell described as "an act of atrocity without parallel in the modern warfare of civilized nations."¹² This most modern war demonstrated, among other things, that these older chivalric models of warfare were ineffectual faced with modern technologies of destruction.

The theatrical qualities of the event were not lost on *The Times*, which asked: "There is something in the pomp and solemnity of this fatal exploit which takes it out of ordinary war, and makes it a grand national sacrifice . . . What is the meaning of a spectacle so strange, so terrific, so disastrous, and yet so grand?"¹³ These repeated invocations of the charge as an observed spectacle in need of interpretation self-consciously acknowledge its performance for the readers in England ten days later. The novelty and force of Russell's account could only be described in visual terms:

Small consolation as it is, survivors, friends, and the public will be thankful that the terrible scene of the 25th had spectators who could appreciate it, and an historian worthy to relate it. Few of our readers will hesitate to allow that they seldom read an incident of war described by so graphic a pen as that of our correspondent in the Crimea. The picture of those valleys and heights, the morning alarm, the enemy stealing onwards . . . are pictures that we are confident will never leave the memory of the least retentive reader.¹⁴

The previous day, the paper had noted that one small consolation of "this fearful death-parade" was that the cavalry conducted themselves in a regimented fashion, as befit members of an elite corps: "when officer and soldier felt themselves hurried to their doom by some inextricable error, they still kept their ranks."¹⁵ The light cavalry charge at Balaclava was rendered spectacular not only in the media reports, but as it originally took place in front of the observing allies.¹⁶

After reading the accounts in *The Times*, Alfred Tennyson wrote his "The Charge of the Light Brigade," which was published in *The Examiner* on 9 December. This earliest published version of his galloping lyric followed Russell's account fairly closely:

Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred,
For up came an order which
Some one had blundered.
'Forward, the Light Brigade!
Take the guns,' Nolan said:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.¹⁷

Tennyson also borrowed specific details from the newspaper, such as the phrases “the valley of death,” and “sabr[ed] the gunners.” Tennyson heavily revised the poem for *Maud, and Other Poems*, published in July 1855, writing a new conclusion and removing the phrase “someone had blundered” and Captain Nolan’s name.¹⁸ When a chaplain at the front requested printed copies of the poem, because “It is the greatest favourite of the soldiers—half are singing it & all want to have on black & white—so as to read [it]—what has so taken them,” Tennyson restored the poem’s original ending and rewrote the second stanza to create “the soldier’s version,” which would remain essentially authoritative.¹⁹ It is:

Half a league, half a league,
 Half a league onward,
 All in the valley of Death
 Rode the six hundred.
 ‘Forward, the Light Brigade!
 Charge for the guns!’ he said:
 Into the valley of Death
 Rode the six hundred.

‘Forward, the Light Brigade!’
 Was there a man dismayed?
 Not though the soldier knew
 Some one had blundered:
 Their’s not to make reply,
 Their’s not to reason why,
 Their’s but to do and die:
 Into the valley of Death
 Rode the six hundred.

.....
 Flashed all their sabres bare,
 Flashed as they turned in air
 Sabring the gunners there,
 Charging an army, while
 All the world wondered:
 Plunged in the battery-smoke
 Right through the line they broke;
 Cossack and Russian
 Reeled from the sabre-stroke
 Shattered and sundered.
 Then they rode back, but not
 Not the six hundred.

Cannon to right of them,
 Cannon to left of them,
 Cannon behind of them
 Volleyed and thundered;

When can their glory fade?
O the wild charge they made!
All the world wondered.
Honour the charge they made!
Honour the Light Brigade,
Noble six hundred!²⁰

Tennyson arranged to have 2000 copies of this revised version of “The Charge of the Light Brigade” printed and sent to the soldiers, whose enthusiasm for it removed his doubts about his ability to write a war poem.²¹

Tennyson made numerous changes to the poem and was sensitive (and susceptible) to criticism of it, in large part because it soon became clear that assigning responsibility for the disaster was a matter of some debate. Yet the poem represents the observers of the action as unified in their response: “All the world wondered.” The repetition of the phrase in the last stanza aligns the awe of the event’s actual spectators with that of the newspaper’s readers, and the poem’s readers. “Wonder” in this poem thus includes the oft-quoted astonishment expressed by the French general Bosquet (“*C’est magnifique, mais ce n’est pas la guerre*”) as well as the poem’s patriotic “O the wild charge they made.” This transformation is achieved through the unacknowledged function of the newspaper in transmitting the spectacle of the event and in uniting its readers in their affective response. Benedict Anderson comments on the reading of newspapers as a “mass ceremony” that solidifies the imagined community of the nation: “each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion.”²² The “world” thus unified in Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade” consists of those reader-observers who can recognize and celebrate the glory in the event. As Jerome McGann has shown, Tennyson’s poem encourages this celebratory response by presenting the light cavalry brigade as an aesthetic object. Tennyson does this by presenting the cavaliers “as if they were cast in a tableau, or in a heroic painting . . . modelled upon a certain tradition of heroic military art.”²³ The poem’s hidden French iconography “represent[s] an effort to appropriate for an English consciousness those images of heroism which had been defined in another, antithetical culture,” images which, McGann suggests, deliberately revise history.²⁴ As Romantic painters like Gros and Géricault glorified Napoleon despite England’s victory at Waterloo, Tennyson reclaims an aesthetic heroism for the Light Cavalry despite their disastrous end. The compelling descriptions in Russell’s journalistic report that *The Times* editorial found so “graphic” are thus transformed into art which encourages patriotic pride rather than questions or debate.

In doing this, Tennyson makes the act of observation transparent, re-

moving the newspaper's repeated acknowledgment of the event's spectacular quality. In early drafts of the poem, stanza four began: "We saw their sabres bare/Flash all at once in air," drawing on Russell's first-hand account of the charge. In changing this anchored observation to a simple statement ("Flashed all their sabres bare"), not only are "the riders . . . made to assume the classic pose of the equestrian hero in action," as McGann notes, but the observers are removed from the scene.²⁵ Tennyson's revised poem does not recognize the observers as part of the poem's subject and therefore does not specify who sees the charge or how this vision takes place. The cavalry charge is simply present in the poem, replayed in the inexorable move forward and back. The poem creates this aestheticized object by eliding an important historical aspect of the event, namely its performance for observers both on the battlefield and at home in England.

The early version of the poem published in the first edition of *Maud* concluded with a stanza that self-consciously acknowledged the poem's memorializing activity:

Honor the brave and bold!
Long shall the tale be told,
Yea, when our babes are old —
How they rode onward.

Shannon and Ricks suggest that this alternate ending and Tennyson's other early revisions seem "to have been largely a function of misperceiving his audience and of revising his poem in terms of an elite metropolitan reader. Once galvanized to address the soldier in the Crimea, he moved confidently and unerringly to create an undying utterance of the English tongue."²⁶ In removing this acknowledgement of the poem's function for the event's domestic audience, Tennyson created a self-enclosed text that exhorts the members of an unspecified and unified ideologic world ("all the world wondered"). That self-enclosed quality contributes to the aestheticization of death that Shannon and Ricks find transcendent and eternal. The final version of "The Charge of the Light Brigade" bears few traces of the discursive mediations of the Crimean conflict—its reporting in the newspapers and the perceived need for domestic voices to "tell the tale" in order to make sense of it—the very impulse that originally led Tennyson to compose his poem.

Smith and Dobell's *Sonnets on the War* contains two poems, each titled "The Cavalry Charge," which also draw heavily upon the newspaper accounts of the event:

Traveller on foreign ground, who'er thou art,
Tell the great tidings! They went down that day
A Legion, and came back from victory
Two hundred men and Glory! On the mart

Is this "*to lose?*" Yet, Stranger, thou shalt say
These were our common Britons. 'Tis our way
In England. Aye, ye heavens! 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; but lo! he brings to shore
A life above his own, which when his heart
Bursts with that final effort, from the stones
Springs up and builds a temple o'er his bones.

★ ★ ★

We mourn them with remorseful tenderness,
And yet, methinks, our tears should be denied
By a proud effort. When they *so* have died,
What is a little breathing more or less?
"Woe's me! each bosom was a Russian targe."
"Who would not pay that priceless price to feel
The trampling thunder and the blaze of steel—
The terror and the splendour of the charge?"
"In vain that human thunderbolt was flung—
In vain 'twas shivered." "At the word they sprung
In one wild light of sword and gleaming corse,
And at the terrible beauty of their look
Death stood dismayed. Jove! how the cowards shook
When on them burst that hurricane of horse!"²⁷

No less patriotic than Tennyson's poem, these sonnets on the same military mishap function very differently because they present multiple perspectives and disjunctions, rather than an ideal unified image. The first sonnet names the event a glorious national victory, but in order to do so, invokes a foreign stranger who questions this nationalist reading of the event by invoking the market's standards of value. Michael Adams suggests that Tennyson's pro-war sentiments in *Maud* represent an aristocratic "vision of a society purged and rejuvenated by war."²⁸ For Adams, "The Charge of the Light Brigade" similarly invokes the sublime glory against the hidden mercantile context:

Theirs was an act of selfless devotion which could have no practical gain, no calculated profit. A Manchester man might put the loss of the Brigade in the debit column of the ledger. . . . but to Tennyson it was the triumph of the noblest fancy. The war had shown that the English had something of the ancient virtue in them yet.²⁹

In contrast, Smith and Dobell's sonnet deliberately acknowledges the fact that the charge was a dreadful loss, emphasizing with italics the simple words.

In claiming commonality between all English and the officers of the Light Cavalry Brigade, the first speaker obscures the historical reality

of the event, which was well known to any reader of *The Times*: “The cavalry in our service is supposed to have always claimed a species of rank over the infantry. Its frequent attendance on the person of Royalty, its splendid uniforms, and its exemption from colonial service, have made it the favourite resort of the aristocracy, and infected it with the weakness of caste.”³⁰ The cavalry’s dandified aristocrats were frequently criticized before the charge at Balaclava for not performing their assigned duties, and the irony of claiming them as “common Britons” would have been obvious to any reader of this sonnet in 1855, no matter how patriotic her sympathies. This sonnet exposes the workings of nationalist sentiment and shows how Tennyson’s aesthetic glorification of the tragic spectacle relies on the aristocratic standard of glory, rather than on any utilitarian standard of value. Just as the death of the dog in this sonnet is not really assuaged by the erection of a temple, the glory associated with the lost cavalry does not explain or justify the disaster.

The second sonnet on the cavalry charge acknowledges the perspective of its writer/speaker and its assumed readers as participants in a national act of mourning. This sonnet rejects any identification between the observers and the cavalry by juxtaposing the mourning “we” and the “they” who “*so* have died.” More so than the first sonnet or Tennyson’s poem, this sonnet self-consciously recognizes the ideological positions of the event’s observers in England, presenting multiple viewpoints on the disaster as quoted speech. The “terrible beauty of their look,” the awe-inspiring aesthetic of the tragedy, here appears juxtaposed with other interpretations of the charge as a performance of self-interested self-sacrifice or as a ridiculous waste of lives. Because the sonnet documents these different perspectives, rather than retelling the event, its effect is very different from the relentless glorification of Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” which elides the battle’s historical observers from the poem. Rather than celebrating and aestheticizing the cavalry charge, Smith and Dobell produced journalistic poems full of contradiction and confusion.

In examining the differences between poetic language and the languages of the novel, Mikhail Bakhtin suggests that traditional poetics mandates a univocal discourse:

Poetic style is by convention suspended from any mutual interaction with alien discourse, any allusion to alien discourse . . . It follows that any sense of the boundedness, the historicity, the social determination and specificity of one’s own language is alien to poetic style, and therefore a critical qualified relationship to one’s own language (as merely one of many languages in a heteroglot world) is foreign to poetic style.³¹

For Bakhtin, most poetic language (defined by literary conventions) is thus ahistorical. Bakhtin’s remarks help expose the ideologies of tradi-

tional literary criticism: those elements of “The Charge of the Light Brigade” most criticized by Shannon and Ricks are those which particularized the poem’s genesis in the newspaper report and public reaction and which were eventually changed to conform to easily recognized and appreciated poetic language, creating an “undying utterance” that satisfies Shannon and Ricks’s literary aesthetic. In contrast, these now-forgotten sonnets by Smith and Dobell refuse abstraction from their historical context, despite their patriotism, and thus resist conventional standards of aesthetic evaluation, because they seek not only to memorialize the war’s events, but also to document them. For Bakhtin, the novel better reflects the heteroglossia of social language, in which “the living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance.”³² These two sonnets by Smith and Dobell on the cavalry charge actively embrace the historical particularities of language and its living stylistic and ideological contradictions. This polyglossia documents the particular historical moment of the charge’s reception in England. In stretching poetic language towards that of the novel, in Bakhtin’s terms, Smith and Dobell’s sonnets challenge conventional ways of reading Victorian war poetry.

Rather than retelling the war’s narrative(s) in aesthetic form, as Tennyson did, Smith and Dobell’s sonnets frequently represent the war by capturing divergent responses to it. These poems acknowledge competing interpretations of events and texts. Such explicit ideological interstices open each sonnet and the entire collection to individual reader’s responses. In the “Cavalry Charge” sonnets, for example, as elsewhere in the volume, the gaps or disjunctions between fragments of unattributed dialogue offer readers seeking to confirm their individual responses to the tragedy a way into the text, a way to participate in its memorial activity. Smith and Dobell’s *Sonnets on the War* thus not only memorialized the public events of the war but also private responses to it.

II

William Russell’s reports in *The Times* about the terrible condition of the British troops, who were ill-supplied for the rigors of the climate, began stirring up public opinion early in the war. In response, the War Department ordered that a photographic expedition be sent to record scenes of the war. There were no official photographers attached to the War Department, so they hired a professional photographer, Richard Nicklin, who left for the Crimea in June 1854. Several weeks

later, he and his assistants boarded a ship with all their photographs, but unfortunately a freak hurricane sunk the ship and all its passengers and cargo. At the end of 1854 the War Department tried again, sending two military ensigns who had never photographed before. They returned with a large number of very badly done photographs that faded so quickly that the War Department discarded them in 1869. These pictures, however, suggested that Russell's reports to *The Times* were not exaggerated.³³

The British government next approached Thomas Agnew's publishing company about conducting a semi-official expedition to the Crimea. In return for access to all persons and places at the front, the photographer would be required to conform to the government's desire to discredit Russell's criticisms. Agnew's company, however, would retain all publication rights, so that this expedition to the Crimea was defined from the outset as a commercial enterprise. Agnew selected Roger Fenton, one of the founding members of the Photographic Exchange Club and the Photographic Society (later the Royal Photographic Society), which fostered communication among the early practitioners of what was then a highly experimental art-science. Fenton had also served as the official photographer for the British Museum for several years before his Crimean expedition, photographing the Museum's sculpture and Egyptian collections. He was also personally known to Queen Victoria, who was very interested in photography, and had photographed her with her children on several occasions.

Fenton was an experienced photographer and was familiar with Frederick Scott Archer's recently introduced collodion wet-plate process, which involved using a glass plate coated with a solution of gun-cotton dissolved in ether as the negative. Collodion on glass produces finely detailed prints compared with the softer, blurred images from paper negatives, which were used throughout the 1840s. Glass negatives vastly reduced exposure time, but the plates had to be used in the camera while wet in order to be adequately sensitive, and they required immediate development, necessitating the construction of enclosed photographic carriages for those working while travelling. Because the process (like all photographic processes at mid-century) required a significant amount of technical expertise, the selection of an experienced photographer was crucial for the government's agenda; Fenton's artistic expertise undoubtedly also enhanced his appeal for Agnew.

In February 1855, Roger Fenton left for the Crimea, with two assistants and a traveling photographic van filled with equipment, including five cameras, over 700 glass plates, and all the chemicals that would be necessary. During his stay at the front, he shipped his negatives to his publisher, who sold prints to the *Illustrated London News* for

reproduction as engravings in order to maintain public interest in the project. Fenton remained in the Crimea only until June, when, weakened by cholera, he returned to England. Shortly thereafter, he was summoned to the palace to show the pictures to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, who were much delighted with them and showed them to the Napoleons, who invited Fenton to their palace as well. The entire series was exhibited to the public in October 1855, and offered for sale a few months later. Fenton's photographs could be purchased in lavish leather-bound volume form as "the complete work" (which actually contained only 160 of the 337 total) or singly, which was of course more expensive.

Fenton's pictures from the Crimea thus operate under technological and ideological constraints. The War Office forbade the photography of dead bodies, and in order for Agnew (and Fenton) to make a commercial success out of the sale of the photographs, the images produced had to be appealing. Although the wet collodion process on glass was a huge improvement over earlier technologies, it still required exposures of 3 to 60 seconds depending on the lighting. The glass plates used for negatives had to be coated with the collodion and used almost immediately before it dried and, in the extreme heat of the Crimean summer, this posed an especial problem.

Within these constraints, however, it is important to recognize how Fenton's images of the war utilize conventions that were familiar and appealing to his original audience. The title page of the published photographs explains that:

The Series of VIEWS, GROUPS, and PORTRAITS, was taken by Mr. FENTON during the Spring and Summer of 1855, and is intended to illustrate faithfully the Scenery of the Camps; to display prominent incidents of Military Life, as well as to perpetuate the Portraits of those distinguished Officers, who have taken part in the ever memorable SIEGE OF SEBASTOPOL.³⁴

The degree to which Fenton's photographs of unique and politically troubling subject material fulfill the generic prescriptions highlighted here has troubled some recent critics. Jorge Lewinski, for example, calls them "harmless, mild, drawing-room pictures" and claims that "a more conscientious man, mindful of his duty as a recorder-photographer, would have done better than Fenton."³⁵ As Jennifer Green-Lewis notes, "The pictures are, without exception, invested with a sense of physical well-being and, indeed, order" that belies the suffering and destruction of this (or any) war.³⁶ Yet Victorian reviews of the exhibited photographs routinely praise their realism, as that in *The Athenaeum*: "These are sworn copies, real evidence, and indeed, but for colour, unsurpassable. When men draw a scene, there may be error,—but when the scene draws itself there can be no mistake."³⁷ Victorian viewers granted photography a documentary authority because the

human involvement in creating the image was less apparent than in other art forms.³⁸ For his Victorian audience, Fenton was acting as a “recorder-photographer” and Lewinski’s demand for more brutal realism would have been incomprehensible, because today’s technological and ideological standards for documentary reportage cannot be applied backwards to the Crimean conflict. Reading photographs involves the viewer’s cultural context equally as much as does the reading of verbal texts, and this is what makes interpreting Fenton’s images so difficult.³⁹

In trying to make sense of why she finds the American Civil War photographs taken by Matthew Brady and others so much more compelling than Fenton’s, Green-Lewis says:

The codes of the Crimean photographs, notwithstanding their formal allegiance to genre painting in landscape, as well as military and historical portraiture, are far harder to read. As a result they have not gained in meaning throughout their own history, but have rather been drained of it; which is not to say that the photographs did not speak to the Victorian viewer in 1855 but that they do not speak to us.⁴⁰

The continued ideological resonance today of the American Civil War means that we are still, in a sense, the intended audience for those works, which naturalized the war’s atrocities so as to make it palatable by recourse to a pastoral ideal of landscape and history.⁴¹ The Crimean war is today less compelling, and the generic conventions Fenton used to naturalize the scenes of war seem contrived or empty. The very conventions that make these photographs difficult for us to read were, however, what made them appealing to a Victorian audience that desired to possess history.

Because moving figures would leave nothing but blurs on the negative, Fenton could not record actual battle scenes, and his “Scenery of the Camps” consists of carefully composed landscapes, offering multiple views from the camp and of famous battlegrounds. For their original viewers, Fenton’s photographs supplemented the narrative of the war already in place, formalizing or codifying existing impressions or mental images of the faces and places of the war: “The landscapes, though of scenes now engraven on every mind, are valuable for their extreme and minute accuracy” said *The Athenaeum*.⁴² The primary function of Fenton’s photographs was to memorialize and record that which was already known, rather than to present something new. For example, the much-praised picture of “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” captured an important landmark for all soldiers at the front that was named in Russell’s reports (Figure 1). (This valley was not, however, where the charge of the Light Cavalry Brigade took place; it was so named because of the frequent firing of Russian cannon shot into it.) The photograph balances light and dark tones and uses intersecting lines to draw the eye towards the horizon. In a letter to



Figure 1. The Valley of the Shadow of Death (This and all subsequent images appear courtesy of the Photography Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.)

William Agnew on April 24th, 1855, Fenton explains his preparations for taking the picture: “I had been down to the caves where our men lie in the daytime when on duty in the trenches two days before to choose the best view.”⁴³ A few days later, near the mortar battery, he complained that “The views here were not very good, as nobody being in front I could make no foreground, and the town is so far off that in itself it is no picture.”⁴⁴ Fenton’s concern with taking aesthetically pleasing photographs does not sit well with contemporary historians who wish to place him only with documentary photographers. However, Fenton’s detailed photographs of the harbor at Balaclava, the camps, and other scenes strongly contrast with the impressionistic watercolors made by William Simpson, the Crimea’s primary war artist, whose sketches were laughed at by the troops at the front as being unrealistic.⁴⁵ In valuing precision of detail and compositional balance, Fenton’s landscapes more accurately documented the scenes of war, but also conformed to the aesthetic principles of the early Victorian amateurs who dominated photography in the 1840s and 1850s.⁴⁶

Fenton’s series included a great many portraits of the war’s notable figures. Many of these, like that of Lieut.-General Sir George de Lacy



Figure 2. Lieut. General Sir George De Lacy Evans

Evans, are virtually indistinguishable from studio portraits that could have been taken anywhere (Figure 2). Nothing marks this image as being from the front; its value consists solely in its memorializing the General. These formal portraits were designed to appeal to the public who avidly followed news of the officers' exploits. In this respect, Fenton's photographs anticipate the appeal of *cartes-de-visite* photographs of celebrities popular in the 1860s. Fenton wrote in a letter on June 4th, "I am now at Headquarters taking a few portraits I am yet in want of . . . and should be away if it were not for these great guns, each of whose portrait has to be fairly hunted down."⁴⁷ Like the landscapes, these portraits supplied images of what was already known to the public in England through Russell's descriptions. Fenton's letters reveal that he self-consciously tried to secure "pictures of the persons and subjects likely to be historically interesting" as history's record became an object of public consumption in daily newspapers.⁴⁸

In contrast, the groups showing "Military Life," as the published title page advertised, exhibited what was not previously known, the conditions of life in the camp: "it is always sitting on broken baskets, and filling up cups, and smoking, and coming out of tents," complained



Figure 3. Lieut. Colonel Hallewell, His Day's Work Over

The Athenaeum.⁴⁹ “Lieut. Colonel Hallewell, His Day’s Work Over” (Figure 3) and other photographs in this group present moments of relaxation, whether real or staged. The titles added to these photographs when they were exhibited and sold bridge the distinction between documentary photography and Victorian “genre” photography, which grew out of the sentimental poses of genre painting. These images only obliquely represent the labor of war by recording its pleasurable lulls. By focusing on the officers and portraying them in this stylized manner, the real hardships faced by the troops are minimized, suggesting perhaps Fenton’s political acquiescence to his royal sponsor. Also, to contemporary eyes used to instantaneous snapshot photography, most Victorian photographs look particularly staged, because each pose had to be held for several seconds. In “General Bosquet and Staff,” for example, several of the men moved while the picture was being taken, but the French General, whom Fenton admiringly compared to Napoleon, maintained his commanding gesture (Figure 4). *The Athenaeum* called this picture “a magical work” that was “full of action” because “the interest and anxiety of the officer could only be given by Nature herself.”⁵⁰ The original audience for these works had, of course, never seen war photographs before; it is difficult for contemporary viewers to see these images with such fresh eyes. In



Figure 4. General Bosquet and Staff

analyzing the function of these images in Victorian culture, it is particularly important not to impute too much naiveté to the original audience, nor too much deliberate manipulation to Fenton. Because photography bears an indexical relation to the world (as Roland Barthes puts it, “the photograph is literally an emanation of the referent”), Victorian audiences understood it as primarily truthful and documentary.⁵¹ These images of the Crimean front could thus function as souvenirs. Today, the souvenir function of photography is completely naturalized for both public and private records of significant people and events. During the Victorian period, Fenton’s photographs and Smith and Dobell’s sonnets coexisted as competing alternative forms of cultural memory.

A reviewer in the *Journal of the Photographic Society of London* wrote of the exhibit of Fenton’s photographs,

This is a collection of national importance . . . and will of course be visited by every one who can have the opportunity. Those who can and those who cannot, will do well to secure some of these remarkable memorials of the war. . . . [Fenton] has returned safely and laden with photographic treasures from the East. Among the numerous subjects . . . there are views, groups, portraits, entrenchments, shipping,—all that we have anxiously read about from day to day.⁵²

Significantly, this reviewer recommends individual consumption as the appropriate memorializing response to the war. The images brought

back by Fenton accrue value in this text from the danger he underwent and from their exotic origin, yet this imperial “treasure” is not unique in number: any number of positive prints could be made from Fenton’s glass negatives, and thus any number of patrons could “secure some of these remarkable memorials.” According to Susan Stewart,

The souvenir distinguishes experiences. We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative.⁵³

For most of Britain’s population, the Crimean conflict existed as a discursive text, rather than as material reality, as the increasingly powerful print media gave a large readership access to the events and issues of the war.⁵⁴ Fenton’s photographs could thus serve as an anchor for readers of Russell’s textual narrative of the war, as well as for combatants’ personal narratives of loss and valor. As seen in the Crimean War and its visual and textual representations, mid-Victorian media culture began to detach the emotive experience of an event (and the accompanying desire to memorialize it through the souvenir) from the material experience of it. Media coverage increased the numbers of people who might desire to remember significant public events, and with photography, any consumer could collect souvenirs of them. This shifts the work of cultural memory from public institutions (the statue and the museum) to private space and practices (the scrapbook).

The Athenaeum imagined the future implications of photography:

As photographers [*sic*] grow stronger in nerve and cooler of head, we shall have not merely the bivouac and the foraging party, but the battle itself painted . . . We shall then have indisputable tests for promotion; and may, perhaps, form galleries of national victories more simple but more veracious than the poor melo-dramas of Versailles [*sic*] or the Louvre. Then, every Englishman’s portfolio will be a hero’s Westminster Abbey; and a richer reward than star of ribbon will be conferred on the leader, whose monument would be forever before the eyes of his grateful country.⁵⁵

As suggested here, it is not simply the photograph itself, or its ability to document reality, that displaces the public edifice; it is the multiple acts of individual consumption that constitute the Victorian monument. The concept of the public monument was multiplied and dispersed in the individual scrapbooks that were considered to better maintain patriotic memory because they would be repeatedly and privately perused. With the advent of photography, history became reproducible and portable, and therefore collectible.

Understanding Fenton’s photographs as souvenirs of a shared public experience helps explain the numerous poses of company groups, like “Officers and Men of the 8th Hussars” (Figure 5), which would interest not only individuals connected with the Hussars, but also the larger group of people who had followed their exploits through news-



Figure 5. Officers and Men of the 8th Hussars

paper reports. Among the posed group portraits are many images of the troops of the various allied ethnic groups (Figure 6). Russell frequently described the exotic costumes and manners of these troops, which included Croats, Montenegrins, and Zouaves, and several of these pictures were reproduced as engravings in the *Illustrated London News* while Fenton was still in the Crimea. Fenton's photographs of the various troops operate as souvenirs of the exotic world that was constructed through the textual narratives of the war.

The picture of the "47th Regiment in Winter Dress" (Figure 7) exoticizes even the British troops: "Their mothers would not know these Laplanders wrapped in rugs and furs, looking more like Tartar couriers booted for a frozen ride over the steppes, than honest men of the line."⁵⁶ In the autumn and winter of 1854, Russell reported how badly equipped the troops were for the harsh winter in the Crimea. The public responded with shiploads of clothing and supplies (many of which arrived too late to be of much help). When Fenton was in the Crimea, however, it was already summer, and he deliberately dressed this group in their heavy winter gear to memorialize an event



Figure 6. Zouaves



Figure 7. Group of the 47th Regiment in Winter Dress



Figure 8. Zouave 2nd Division (Roger Fenton)

important to the general public. Susan Stewart suggests that “To have a souvenir of the exotic is to possess both a specimen and a trophy; on the one hand, the object must be marked as exterior and foreign, on the other it must be marked as arising directly out of an immediate experience of its possessor.”⁵⁷ However, the souvenir that is for sale to a distant observer reflects that consumer’s experience: even Fenton’s exotic subjects are chosen so as to reflect the mediated experiences of the war’s observers at home in England, rather than the actual hardships he and others faced. (Fenton described his experiences in some of his letters, which he repeatedly asked his family and publisher to keep secret.)

The most famous Crimean picture that includes Fenton emblemizes imperial cultural appropriation: Fenton’s portrait was published with the title “Zouave 2nd Division” (Figure 8). This personal joke authenticates his experience as a traveller (like other Victorians who adopted “native costume”) and reminds us that Fenton’s aesthetic was not strictly documentary. Yet this image captures one kind of truth: the operation of the souvenir, which “reduces the public, the monumental, and the three-dimensional into the miniature, that which can be enveloped by the body, or into the two-dimensional representation, that which can be appropriated within the privatized view of the

individual subject.”⁵⁸ The transformation of Westminster Abbey into “every Englishman’s portfolio” indicates a radically new Victorian relation to history’s events, one that was defined by personal appropriation and consumption, or the logic of the souvenir.

III

Like Fenton’s photographs, Smith and Dobell’s *Sonnets on the War* transform the public events of the war into private memorials. The 39 sonnets cover a variety of subjects, including descriptions of battles and of the wounded, descriptions of soldiers’ families at home, allegorical political statements, portraits of Napoleon and Florence Nightingale, and meditative reflections on the nature of war. There are several pairs of sonnets sharing the same title and printed on facing pages: the (numbered) dedicatory sonnets, and sonnets titled “The Wounded,” “The Cavalry Charge,” and “America.” These pairs inscribe the collaborative nature of the volume, which nowhere indicates authorship of individual sonnets.⁵⁹

The arrangement of the sonnets in the volume follows a rough chronology of the Crimean conflict before early 1855: a sonnet on the Alma is followed, although not directly, by those on the cavalry charge at Balaclava and then by one on the battle at Sebastopol. Yet the volume does not construct a coherent linear narrative of the war. There are no links between individual sonnets, except for those sharing titles, and the juxtaposition of sonnets on different topics reinforces the non-sequential quality of the book. There is not, as in many other sonnet series, a coherent perceiving/speaking mind that holds the group of sonnets together. Instead these sonnets oscillate among multiple perspectives: third-person narration of events, descriptions of scenes or attitudes, first-person reflective meditations, exclamatory exhortations, and quoted dialogue also contribute to the contradictory juxtapositions of the book’s arrangement.

Just one year before the publication of the war sonnets, Smith and Dobell had been castigated as members of the “Spasmodic School” by William Aytoun in *Firmilian*, which parodied the emotional content and overly dramatic style of Smith’s *A Life-Drama* (1853) and Dobell’s *Balder* (1854). These popular long poems about deranged, lonely, Byronic heroes were criticized by Aytoun and others as formless loose rantings, a kind of Romanticism gone awry. Charles Kingsley was the first to apply the term “Spasmodic” to the younger generation of poets influenced by Philip Bailey’s incredibly successful *Festus* (1839), describing them as “a spasmodic, vague, extravagant, effeminate school of poetry” that drew on the worst elements in Shelley and in Byron. Kingsley claimed that these younger poets were misinterpreting the lives and work of Shelley in particular:

Words thrown off in the heat of passion; shameful self-revealings which he has written with his very heart's blood: ay, even fallacies which he has put into the mouths of dramatic characters for the very purpose of refuting them . . . will, by the lazy, the frivolous, the feverish, the discontented, be taken for integral parts and noble traits of the man to whom they are attracted.⁶⁰

Smith and Dobell's works were criticized for their excess of emotion, lack of coherent structure and meaning, obscure historical references, and a solipsistic and inflated conception of the poet's role. Their poet-heroes dreamed of changing the world through their art but wound up mired instead in their mental states. Because these works delved into the insane mind without demonstrating its progression towards health, they were disturbing to readers like Kingsley who desired moral certainties and curative literature. Aytoun's satire as well as general shifts in Victorian taste contributed to the subsequent decline in Smith's and Dobell's poetic popularity, although each remained active in literary circles.⁶¹

The *Sonnets on the War* volume, then, offers a fascinating contrast to the earlier productions of these two poets. In choosing a small, formally restrictive poetic form to represent an ongoing national event, Smith and Dobell were moving away from their earlier works in both form and content. The extreme formal variety and discursive digression of their earlier works would not be possible within an individual sonnet's limits. The war sonnets also achieved an obvious social and political relevance that their poet-heroes (and, by extension, themselves) had previously only desired but not achieved.

E. B. Hamley, reviewing the volume from the front for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, found many of the sonnets unintelligible: "Among the jointly-produced sonnets are some which we don't understand, and therefore cannot conscientiously speak of. There are others which we only think we understand, and, therefore, will also leave unnoticed, for fear of going off on a wrong tack."⁶² But the satire of his essay, which also reviewed R.C. Trench's *Alma and Other Poems*, rests on the humor of non-combatant poets writing about war: for example, he reminds Trench that "the slenderness of a war-kit forbids us to carry lexicons," suggesting that translations into Greek were of little benefit to military readers. However, it is clear that Smith and Dobell's volume was not aimed at a military reader—its form and purpose were aimed at the audience at home. Smith and Dobell use the sonnet's memorializing and documentary qualities to transform the public events of the war into privately possessed souvenirs for the audience who, like the poets themselves, experienced the war only through the discursive mediations of news reports. As souvenirs, Smith and Dobell's sonnets have a very different rhetorical and cultural function than Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade." Whereas Tennyson removed the markers of the event's audiences from his

poem to create an aestheticized performance of the cavalry charge, Smith and Dobell's sonnets deliberately involve their reader and her personal memories, resituating the documentation of public events into the diffuse private sphere of consumption, as did Fenton's photographs.

The shared and obscured authorship, doubled titles, and the multiplicity of topics represented in *Sonnets on the War* make the book function as a collection organized by emotive response and loosely defined subject matter, just like the many Victorian albums of quotations, pictures, and poetry compiled by individuals as scrapbooks or commodified as annuals or gift books.⁶³ The ultimate goal of the volume is to document and preserve history as constituted in captured moments. These moments function as souvenirs of national experience through the representative figures of the army surgeon, the widow, and the wounded soldier, which operate as generally applicable touchstones for personal and cultural memory. The purpose of this sonnet collection, like any Victorian scrapbook, is to call forth emotional response, as imagined in "Miss Nightingale":

How must the soldier's tearful heart expand,
Who from a long and obscure dream of pain,—
His foeman's frown imprinted in his brain,—
Wakes to thy healing face and dewy hand!
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.
Some pitying student of a nobler age,
Lingering o'er this year's half-forgotten page,
Shall see its beauty smiling ever there;
Surprised to tears his beating heart he stills,
Like one who finds among Athenian hills
A Temple like a lily white and fair. (24)

Smith and Dobell here suggest that their sonnets will operate as a memorial still capable of affecting "pitying students" of the future. Although this sonnet attributes that effect to Florence Nightingale's essential charity, it also clearly offers a model of reading: this "half-forgotten" book is a collection of individually affecting lyrics to "linger" over. As Stewart suggests, the souvenir "is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia," and its creation requires imagining the backwards glances of the future.⁶⁴ According to Victorian sonnet theory, the sonnet was ideally suited for this purpose because of its ability to record specific details and impressions. Poetry, and the sonnet's particular ability to capture a portrait, links the heart of the future reader to the tearful heart of the soldier in a physical and affective response that Smith and Dobell saw as the goal of their volume.

"Rest" similarly looks to the future readers of these poems:

A victory! Illumined towns rejoice!
 Pale, pale our cheeks when deadly tidings come!
 Is this eternal,—cannon, trump, and drum?
 Thank God this troubled century of noise
 Shall grow as the untrodden desert dumb.
 This England's fame of which we sing and rave,
 Shall seem, years hence, unto the eyes of some,
 Like the effaced inscription on a grave. (28, ll. 1–8)

This recognition of the eventual effacement of the experience of history is the impulse behind the collecting of the souvenir. To know that what seems currently affecting and immediate will not seem so in the future, and to believe that it is worth documenting, is the impulse underlying this collection of sonnets. Smith and Dobell's sonnets transform public events into reproducible yet privately held souvenirs through documentary strategies and conventional representations of affect that together explore the intersection of private emotion and public events.

One of the most unusual features of the sonnets in this volume is the inclusion of quoted or indirect speech: "Vox Populi," for example, presents a collection of sayings:

What if the Turk be foul or fair? Is't known
 That the sublime Samaritan of old
 Withheld his hand till the bruised wretch had told
 His creed? Your neighbour's roof is but a shed,
 Yet if he burns shall not the flame enfold
 Your palace? Saving his, you save your own.
 Oh ye who fall that Liberty may stand,
 The light of coming ages shines before
 Upon your graves! Oh ye immortal band,
 Whether ye wrestled with this Satan o'er
 A dead dog, or the very living head
 Of Freedom, every precious drop ye bled
 Is holy. 'Tis not for his broken door
 That the stern goodman shoots the burglar dead. (19)

This collection of questions, metaphors, and almost-proverbs suggests a range of possible opinions about the war that were enunciated not only in the popular newspapers, but in quotidian situations as well. This sonnet takes no stand on these sayings; instead the disjunctions and shades of different meaning are simply set forth as markers of popular opinion.

One of the strengths of Smith and Dobell's book as a self-conscious document of cultural attitudes towards the war is the range of opinions included. The doubled sonnets explicitly suggest differentiation and comparison, and the absence of authorial attribution for any of the poems means that on any individual page the quoted or expressed

views are free-floating, set forward as documents rather than as arguments. Both sonnets entitled "The Wounded" offer a variety of voices:

"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?" "But she would lean my head
Upon her breast; oh, let me live!" "Be wise."
"I could be very happy; both these eyes
Are left me; I should see her; she would kiss
My forehead; only let me live." —He dies
Even in the passionate prayer. "Good Doctor, say
If thou canst give more than another day
Of life?" "I think there may be hope." "Pass on.
I will not buy it with some widow's son!"
"Help," "help," "help," "help!" "God curse thee!" "Doctor, stay,
Yon Frenchman went down earlier in the day."

"See to my brother, Doctor; I have lain
All day against his heart; it is warm there;
This stiffness is a trance; he lives! I swear—
I swear he lives!" "Good Doctor, tell my ain
Auld Mother;" —but his pale lips moved in vain.
"Doctor, when you were little Master John,
I left the old place; you will see it again.
Tell my poor Father,—turn down the wood-lane
Beyond the home-field—cross the stepping-stone
To the white cottage, with the garden-gate—
O God!" —He died. "Doctor, when I am gone
Send this to England." "Doctor, look upon
A countryman!" "Devant mon Chef? Ma foi!"
"Oui, il est blessé beaucoup plus que moi." (15–16)

These adjacent sonnets attempt to give voice to the published statistics of the numbers of wounded. The strong emotions criticized in Smith and Dobell's earlier poems are foreshortened here, reduced to sharp extracts and glimpses of the life narratives behind each quoted sentence. These sonnets themselves function as collections, documenting a range of possibilities under a single (though also doubled) title. Within the condensed form of the sonnet, Smith and Dobell manage to gesture at the enormity of the war's losses through ellipsis.

This elliptical strategy of documentation is most evident in the battle sonnets, like "Alma," which most closely approach narratives of the war:

The Chasseurs spread like flame from crag to crag,
The lowering English silence was unbroke;
"Forward" strung all our columns, and a shock
Of valour tangled to the dancing flag.
A wild cheer drowned the cannon. Blind with smoke,
Stumbling o'er rocks, shattered with shell and shot,

We staggered on. Our banner—glorious rag,—
 Is dashed to earth,—from dying hands 'tis caught,
 Again 'tis foremost in the stern advance.
 Hurrah! We see the faces of our foes!
 A blinding gush of flame, a rank goes down,
 A stifling vapour hides the bloody close.
 Up springs the breeze; and lo! on Alma's crown
 Stand sternly-lowering England and flushed France. (13)

The shifts in tense from past to present convey the action and confusion of battle, condensed here into four carefully described moments. Syntax is more important in this sonnet than its other formal features, particularly in lines 5–9, where enjambment and elliptical punctuation carry forward the movement of the sonnet, and impart the confusion of the battle. Even though this sonnet does not narrate the sequence of events, the key details are all included. This battle to gain control of the hills on the main road leading to Balaclava was, in fact, characterized by obscurity: French troops located previously unseen paths up the cliffs; the Russians set fire to the nearby village of Burliuk, filling the area with smoke; and the British exploded a Russian ammunition wagon (the “blinding gush of flame”).⁶⁵ By adopting the perspective of the battle’s participants, Smith and Dobell emphasize affective responses to the battle that readers familiar with the reports of the battle could thus imaginatively share through reading the poem. Without this contextual knowledge of the battle’s details, the sonnet loses impact and appears merely disjointed.

Although not literally documentary, as neither poet went to the Crimea, Smith and Dobell’s portrait sonnets supply discrete representations of scenes, places, and persons already introduced into Britain’s cultural narrative, as did Fenton’s photographs. These are sometimes startling in their explicit imagery, as in “The Army Surgeon”:

Over that breathing waste of friends and foes,
 The wounded and the dying, hour by hour,—
 In will a thousand, yet but one in power,—
 He labours thro’ the red and groaning day.
 The fearful moorland where the myriads lay
 Moved as a moving field of mangled worms.
 And as a raw brood, orphaned in the storms,
 Thrust up their heads if the wind bend a spray
 Above them, but when the bare branch performs
 No sweet parental office, sink away
 With hopeless chirp of woe, so as he goes
 Around his feet in clamorous agony
 They rise and fall; and all the seething plain
 Bubbles a cauldron vast of many-coloured pain. (14)

Portrait sonnets written to or about famous people were extremely common throughout the nineteenth century, documenting people or

events known to the poem's readers, whether contemporaneous, as in Andrew Lang's "Colonel Burnaby," historical, as in Matthew Arnold's "Shakespeare," or fictional, as in Austin Dobson's "Don Quixote." Smith and Dobell here use the portrait sonnet to represent the war's unnamed participants. This portrait of the army surgeon, unfettered by the mandated niceties of Fenton's photographic portraits of the war's "great guns," offers a more powerful commentary on the conflict. Abstracted from any number of specific individuals, this composite portrait nevertheless conveys a picture that transcends the limits of this particular war even as it represents its terrible losses.⁶⁶

Another portrait sonnet, "Home," relies upon the conventions of mid-Victorian genre painting:

She turned the fair page with her fairer hand—
 More fair and frail than it was wont to be—
 O'er each remembered thing he loved to see
 She lingered, and as with a fairy's wand
 Enchanted it to order. Oft she fanned
 New motes into the sun; and as a bee
 Sings thro' a brake of bells, so murmured she,
 And so her patient love did understand
 The reliquary room. Upon the sill
 She fed his favourite bird. "Ah, Robin, sing!
 He loves thee." Then she touches a sweet string
 Of soft recall, and towards the Eastern hill
 Smiles all her soul—for him who cannot hear
 The raven croaking at his carrion ear. (23)

The gruesome "carrion ear" which "cannot hear" counterpoints the sonnet's domestic narrative, the specifics of which are conventional enough to be generalizable, and hence recognizable, to the entire nation. This sonnet captures talismanic memorial activity, doubly inscribing loss and time into its representation of war as it transforms that activity into a memorial sonnet. The only harsh note here is the final couplet, which deliberately fractures the sentimental effect wrought by the visual convention of the forlorn lover. Because the individual griefs of a war are numerous—this story of faithful love and loss could be (and was) repeated many times—this portrait sonnet serves to mark all such lost loves, all such memorial acts.

Although formally experimental in their irregular or unrhymed lines and quoted dialogue, Smith and Dobell's sonnets remain true to what Victorian readers thought of as the essential rhetorical functions of the sonnet form. The sonnet's ability to present descriptive details and preserve individual moments of perception made it the ideal form for capturing important scenes and events. Each sonnet in this book thus functions as a self-contained description or memorial touchstone. Read individually, many of these sonnets offer only sentimental clichés,

yet they attract richer meaning from their placement in a collection of similarly conventional talismans. Collected together, these sonnets represent the war from multiple and divergent perspectives which explore and record a self-consciously important moment of national history—history that is always experienced individually. By offering readers sentimental conventions, multiple viewpoints, and disjunctions of subject and tone, Smith and Dobell's book of sonnets acknowledged and encouraged the media consumer's participation in the nation's events. If judged by the lyrical standards applied to most Victorian war poetry, these are unusual but mediocre poems; understood as examples of the cultural logic of the souvenir, they reveal important Victorian uses of the sonnet form to capture and record moments of time. The souvenir item is known by its conventional evocation of an experience that is by definition shared yet individually possessed. It thus gestures simultaneously towards the private, lived experience of history and towards the public narrative record of it. Smith and Dobell's sonnets and Roger Fenton's photographs of the Crimean war illustrate how the documentary and memorializing qualities valued in the sonnet form and in photography were used to harness public history for private consumption.

Notes

- 1 George Sanderlin, "The Influence of Milton and Wordsworth on the Early Victorian Sonnet," *ELH* 5 (1938): 225–51; William T. Going, *Scanty Plot of Ground: Studies in the Victorian Sonnet* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976).
- 2 [William Davies], "The Sonnet," *Quarterly Review* 134 (January 1873): 204.
- 3 See, for example, "On the Sonnet," *Christian Remembrancer* n.s. 2 (Nov 1841): 321–329; (Dec 1841): 401–412, and Leigh Hunt and S. Adams Lee, eds. *The Book of the Sonnet*, vol. 1 (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1867), 80–84. Biographical readings of the sonnet form largely developed from the reception of Shakespeare's sonnets in the nineteenth century. See Margreta de Grazia, *Shakespeare Verbatim: the Reproduction of Authenticity and the 1790 Apparatus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).
- 4 [John Dennis], "The English Sonnet," *The Cornhill Magazine* 25 (May 1872): 581–98; [William Davies], "The Sonnet," *Quarterly Review* 134 (January 1873): 190.
- 5 For further discussion of Victorian theories about the sonnet form, see Natalie M. Houston, "From Trifles to Treasure: The Construction of Value in Nineteenth-Century Sonnet Anthologies," *Victorian Poetry* 37 (Summer 1999): 243–272.
- 6 Traditional literary histories of the sonnet include: Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 29–55; John Fuller, *The Sonnet* (London: Methuen, 1972); Going; R. D. Havens, *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1922), 478–548; Michael R. G. Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1992); Jennifer Wagner, *A Moment's Monument: Revisionary Poetics and the Nineteenth-Century English Sonnet* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1996).
- 7 On the history of the Crimean war, see Alan Palmer, *The Banner of Battle: The Story of the Crimean War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987) and Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Reason Why* (London: Constable, 1953). See also the essay by Helmut and Alison Gernsheim in Roger Fenton, *Roger Fenton, Photographer of the Crimean War: His Photographs and Letters from the Crimea* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1954).
- 8 Patrick Waddington, "Theirs But to Do and Die": *The Poetry of the Charge of the Light Brigade*

- at *Balaklava*, 25 October 1854 (Nottingham: Astra Press, 1995) provides an extensive bibliography of Crimean war poetry.
- 9 On the history of Tennyson criticism as it relates to the Crimean war poems, see Jerome J. McGann, "Tennyson and the Histories of Criticism," *The Beauty of Inflections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 173–203, and Michael C. C. Adams, "Tennyson's Crimean War Poetry: a Cross-Cultural Approach," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40.3 (1979): 405–22.
- 10 Editorial leader, *The Times*, 13 November 1854, 6.
- 11 [W. H. Russell], "The War in the Crimea: The Operations of the Siege," *The Times*, 14 November 1854, 8. See Woodham-Smith for further biographical and geographical details. Other explanations of the misunderstood order have since been offered.
- 12 [W. H. Russell], 8.
- 13 Editorial leader, *The Times*, 14 November 1854, 6.
- 14 Editorial leader, *The Times*, 14 November 1854, 6.
- 15 Editorial leader, *The Times*, 13 November 1854, 6.
- 16 On the cultural importance of military costume and discipline, see Scott Hughes Myerly, *British Military Spectacle: From the Napoleonic Wars through the Crimea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).
- 17 *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 509.
- 18 For the poem's composition and publication history, see Edgar Shannon and Christopher Ricks, "'The Charge of the Light Brigade': The Creation of a Poem," *Studies in Bibliography* 38 (1985): 1–44.
- 19 Tennyson repeated the chaplain's words in a letter to John Forster on 6 August 1855, quoted in Shannon and Ricks, 8.
- 20 *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, 509–511.
- 21 In a letter on 11 August to Gerald Massey, who had criticized Tennyson's revisions in *Maud*, Tennyson sent the latest version of the poem, explaining "This is the soldier's version & I daresay they are the best critics." See Shannon and Ricks, 9.
- 22 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 35.
- 23 Jerome J. McGann, "Tennyson and the Histories of Criticism," *The Beauty of Inflections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 199.
- 24 McGann, 200.
- 25 McGann, 200.
- 26 Shannon and Ricks, 32.
- 27 Alexander Smith and The Author of "Balder" and "The Roman" [Sydney Dobell], *Sonnets on the War* (London: David Bogue, 1855), 21–22. Page references hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
- 28 Adams, 415.
- 29 Adams, 421.
- 30 Editorial leader, *The Times*, 14 November 1854, 6.
- 31 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 285.
- 32 Bakhtin, 276.
- 33 Fenton's expedition is discussed in most standard histories of photography. See also John Hannavy, *Roger Fenton of Crimble Hall* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1975), and Helmut and Alison Gernsheim's essay in Fenton. On the technical history of photography, see Helmut and Alison Gernsheim, *The History of Photography* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969).
- 34 Roger Fenton, *Photographs From the Crimea*, title page, quoted in Hannavy, 2.
- 35 Jorge Lewinski, *The Camera at War: A History of War Photography from 1848 to the Present Day* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 39. For other ethical discussions of photography, see Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1977) and Carol Schloss, *In Visible Light: Photography and the American Writer 1840–1940* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
- 36 Jennifer Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians: Photography and the Culture of Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 100.

- 37 Review of Fenton's *Photographs From the Crimea*, *The Athenaeum* 1457 (29 September 1855): 1118.
- 38 Jennifer Green-Lewis relates early conceptions of photography's truth to Victorian realism more generally. See also Gail Buckland, *Reality Recorded: Early Documentary Photography* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1974). It was much debated throughout the nineteenth century whether photography was an art or a science; many writers combined the terms and wrote of the new "art-science."
- 39 See Alan Trachtenberg, "Albums of War: On Reading Civil War Photographs." *Representations* 9 (1985): 1–32.
- 40 Green-Lewis, 140.
- 41 See Timothy Sweet, *Traces of War: Poetry, Photography, and the Crisis of the Union* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).
- 42 Review, 1118.
- 43 Fenton, 68.
- 44 Fenton, 71.
- 45 Fenton, 73.
- 46 See Grace Seiberling and Carolyn Bloore, *Amateurs, Photography, and the Mid-Victorian Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
- 47 Fenton, 89–90.
- 48 Fenton, 75.
- 49 Review, 1118.
- 50 Review, 1118.
- 51 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 80.
- 52 Review, *Journal of the Photographic Society of London*, 21 September 1855, 221, quoted in Green-Lewis, 102–103.
- 53 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1993), 135.
- 54 Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800–1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 318–364.
- 55 Review 1117–1118.
- 56 Review, 1118.
- 57 Stewart, 147.
- 58 Stewart, 137–38.
- 59 Although individual sonnets republished in other collections of each poet's work can now be attributed, I have chosen not to in this essay, as readers in 1855 did not have that knowledge.
- 60 Charles Kingsley, "Thoughts on Shelley and Byron," in *Literary and General Lectures and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1890), 52. The essay was originally published in *Fraser's Magazine*, November 1853.
- 61 Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Victorian Temper* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 41–65; Mark A. Weinstein, *William Edmondstoune Aytoun and the Spasmodic Controversy*, *Yale Studies in English* 165 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).
- 62 [E. B. Hamley,] "Poetry of the War," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 77 (May 1855): 533. The sonnets were also reviewed in *The Athenaeum* 1420 (13 January 1855): 45–46.
- 63 See Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 11–102, and Frederick W. Faxon, *Literary Annuals and Gift Books: A Bibliography 1823–1903*, with supp. essays by Eleanore Jamieson and Iain Bain (London: 1912. Reprint, Middlesex: Private Libraries Assoc, 1973).
- 64 Stewart, 135.
- 65 Palmer, 92–110.
- 66 This was one of the few sonnets from this volume to be frequently reprinted later in the century.