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## Embodied Sympathy and Divine Detachment in Crimean War Medical Poetry

**I**n October 1854, the *London Times* attempted to solicit donations, both monetary and material, for soldiers wounded in the Crimean War:

Every man of common modesty must feel, not exactly ashamed of himself, but somehow rather smaller than usual, when he reads the strange and terrible news of the war. Here we are sitting by our firesides, devouring the morning paper in luxurious solitude, lazily tracing the path of conquest on one of ARROWSMITH'S best maps...to us war is a spectacle, and if we happen to have no friends engaged in it, a very amusing spectacle. <sup>1</sup>

While this language was used to elicit sympathy for the soldiers' suffering (the "terrible news"), the rhetoric of distance, of spatial remove, nonetheless strikes the reader. Every man would feel spatially different, "smaller than usual," when he reads the "strange" news of the war. "Strange" again makes the war alien or other, and this effect is further accentuated by the image of the reader "lazily tracing the path of conquest". Here, the difference between "conquest", a verb implying speed, and the "lazy" tracing, is palpable. Finally, the editorial ends with an image of "spectacle," analogous to a theater production, one the viewer can watch, and react to, from a distance.

While Mary Favret's recent (2009) *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* argues for the Napoleonic wars as the first instance of "war at a distance," I argue that the discourse of detachment, or "abstraction," was more pronounced in the Crimean War, the first widespread conflict involving the use of anesthesia, in this case chloroform.<sup>2</sup> The lack of visible suffering allowed medical professionals and newspaper readers to detach from patients' pain. Exploring medical poems—poems written about patients, surgeons, and, increasingly, nurses—allows us to access this larger debate within a medical setting. This essay argues that readers detached from the pain of these soldiers by reading poetry that mythologized surgeons, nuns, and mostly Florence Nightingale, the mystical "lady with the lamp." Thus myth, in this case myth associated with divinity, becomes an important category of abstraction, one not addressed by Favret in her Romantic-era book.

In these abstract poems, sympathy becomes not sympathy for the individual patient, or even for the individual caretaker, but for a representative of a higher power. Ironically, this sympathy results in a detachment from the patients themselves. Through the lens of both the spasmodic and the religiously-tinged poems depicting nurses and surgeons in the war, I argue that these poems grapple with the limits of sympathy and the dangers of a particular type of detachment—a spiritual "rising above" worldly circumstances.

### **War and Medicine in the Crimea**

While earlier medical poems were written by doctors, surgeons, or even patients, none of the poems I have found were written by anyone involved in, or even in physical proximity to, the Crimean War.<sup>3</sup> This sense of distance was only increased by the confusion regarding the aims of the Crimean War in general, and of the British Medical Office specifically. While military historians have covered this ground extensively, it suffices here to say that what began as an argument between French Catholics and Greek and Russian Orthodox over the ownership of the keys to the Nativity in Bethlehem exploded into a larger concern over Russia's (read Eastern) domination of Western (read Christian) territories. Ironically, it was Russia's 1853 encroachment on non-Christian Turkey which sparked the war itself. Unlike the roughly concurrent American Civil War, the British fought a fairly unknown enemy in a very far-away place. People read, mostly in the *London Times*, of the Battle of Inkermann, fought in the dense fog, and the battle of Balaklava, a decidedly un-heroic loss later memorialized and re-formulated by Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade."<sup>4</sup>

Like the political situation, the medical one was bureaucratically dense and confusing. At the end of 1855, a number of surgeons arrived to minister to the British army, but they served under a Medical Office that had not changed since 1810. Headed by a Director-General, Dr. Andrew Smith, the hierarchy also included Inspector-Generals of hospitals, Deputy-Inspectors, First-class Surgeons, Second-class Surgeons (or regimental surgeons), and Assistant Surgeons. <sup>5</sup> Although their salaries were low and they were expected to operate in the trenches or even on the battlefield, the requirements for serving were competitive and exclusive. An assistant surgeon position required a diploma from the Royal College of Surgeons in England, Scotland, or Ireland; attendance at a “hospital of celebrity” for eighteen months; and an A.B. or A.M. (the American Bachelor’s or Master’s degree) in addition to the M.D. degree. Young men had to be single and between 21 and 24 years of age. <sup>6</sup>

Yet for all that requirements were stringent, most of these recruits were not trained in military medicine. According to William Fergusson M.D., Inspector General of Military Hospitals,

The position of the young physicians...was pitiable and ridiculous...Their station in society...proclaimed them to be a class far superior to what the army had commonly received....To one of them I was attached in the first campaign. He could read Hippocrates in the original Greek, but he did not know the grain scales and weights when he saw them; and to have touched a bleeding wound, even while the sound of the cannon was booming in our ears, would have been to lose caste. ..To have placed such a man over the heads of all who were experienced in military medicine and disease, while he was not fit for any work, was as stupid and gross an abuse as could have been imposed on an army. <sup>7</sup>

Again, notions of class difference leap from the page (reading Hippocrates is contrasted with “grain scales” and “weights”), and Fergusson’s choice of “caste” in his discussion of an imperialist war is an interesting one. The lack of “experience” in “military medicine and disease” proved costly when an 1854 Cholera outbreak depleted the army’s supplies. Following this, in the winter of 1854-55, the cold Russian winter wreaked havoc on the troops, causing a large number of deaths from cold and illness. <sup>8</sup>

Stephanie Markovits has thoroughly explored the role of the media in communicating information about the Crimean War. Simultaneously, papers like

the *Times* simultaneously attempted sympathy for the soldiers' situation (asking for the public to send money and linens), but helped, as in the beginning example, to maintain that sense of distance from war. Also, with advances in anesthesia, mainly the use of chloroform, the wounded body could no longer feel, leading many to feel detached *from* it.

### **Spasmodic Poetry: The Rhythm of Humanity**

As biographer Martha Westwater notes, Sydney Dobell himself felt that his sonnets on the war lacked "adequacy" precisely because of their removal (or detachment) from the war itself.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, Dobell attempts to construct sympathy with his characters through bodily images and varied rhythms, the rhythms that earned him and a small group of poets the title of the "spasmodics." In "The Army Surgeon," included in the 1855 *Sonnets on the War*, Dobell connects the wounded soldiers with organic waste, birds, and even a "melting pot" of pain:

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.<sup>10</sup>

The rhythm of this sonnet remains rather consistently iambic pentameter, and this pattern corresponds with the "breathing waste" of "friends and foes." One is meant to envision soldiers on both sides connecting in their labored, yet consistent, breathing, their physiological apparatus. Again and again, the soldiers are connected: "in will a thousand, and yet one in power." Like any organic creation, the soldiers move together, groan together, as a "moving field of mangled worms." The breathing, the power shared by the men, is also shared by all life, including the

lowest organic forms. To reinstate this parallel, Dobell brings in the metaphor of baby birds “orphaned in the storm,” “ris[ing] and fall[ing]” almost rhythmically around the surgeon’s feet. Aside from the surgeon, strangely detached from the emotion and rhythm of this poem, the plain becomes more and more unified, like a soup assuming the many flavors of the soldiers’ individual sufferings.

Dobell’s adjective, “many coloured,” reinstates the Newtonian resonance between the color spectrum, music, and organic vibrations; as far back as Isaac Newton, philosophers had argued that the color spectrum and musical octave (both related to the rhythm of forms like poetry) “could discover the fundamental ‘harmonic’ principles that structured all physical reality, including the brains and nervous systems of living organisms.”<sup>11</sup> What if the vibrations of the material world all shared a rhythmic similarity, a similarity that could connect all people? Dobell’s poem espouses a similar belief in the unifying power of the human body.\*

This interest in vibrations and rhythm also resonates in Dobell’s auditory poems that rely on a cacophony of voices to replicate the confusion of the wartime wounded:

“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.”

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\* In 1857, Dobell delivered a lecture on the “Nature of Poetry” in Queen Street Hall, a building that belonged to the well-respected Royal College of Physicians. Clearly, Dobell chose this location, and this audience, out of a desire to emphasize what he believed was the physiological, sympathetic nature of poetry itself. In this lecture, Dobell referred to acoustical experiments (clearly known to his audience) by Ernst Chladni (1756-1827) upon a horizontal plate of glass strewn with sand. When Chladni applied a violin bow to the plate, it not only produced a “peculiar sound” but also “exhibited a corresponding arrangement of the sand” (Dobell, *Thoughts on Art, Philosophy, and Religion: Selected from the Unpublished Papers of Sydney Dobell*. 24). This “arrangement of the sand,” Dobell claimed, connected sound and sight in a universal pattern, much like poetry itself.

The first speaker significantly has lain against his comrade's "heart" the entire day and feels its warmth. Dobell employs a typically spasmodic rhythm (he lives! I swear—I swear he lives!) to replace the "stiffness" of the soldier with some kind of rhythmic regularity. In this poem, dashes punctuate the commonplace with the sublime; "tell my ain/ Auld mother" is cut off by "his pale lips moved in vain," and the long instructions to report to another soldier's father are suddenly punctuated by "He died." Significantly, the connection across "friends and foes" remains a strong one, physiological and mortal similarities winning out over national allegiances. Directly following the line "Doctor, look upon a countryman!," Dobell gives us a pair of lines in French, translated as "Behind my head? Faith! Yes, he hurts much more than I." The soldiers remain connected by their bodily similarities, but this is an instance of sympathy not just for but also among the soldiers, as the French soldier tells the doctor to attend to his comrade first.

For Sydney Dobell, this selfless resignation for the sake of another typifies an active Christianity.\* As Mason writes, "Dobell connected his interest in art, and specifically poetry, to his religious belief, both expressive of a pulsative and convulsive emotion that put the individual in a correct state of mind to contemplate God."<sup>12</sup> Again, this "emotion" is both psychological—it allows one to "contemplate God"—and physiological, resembling the systolic and diastolic back-and-forth of the human heartbeat. In his *Thoughts on Art, Philosophy, and Religion*, Dobell examines the time between heartbeats and concludes that

The interval of time between every healthy heart-throb is precisely equal to the throb itself. Physiology has already shown that other recognizable organic motions of the body—for instance, the action of the lungs—bear definite relations to this motion of the heart: and in all modesty I would suggest to the great Physiologists here present whether there be not reason to infer that every portion of the incessant vital action of the system is keeping measured dance to that great beater of time?<sup>13</sup>

The phrase "vital action" is important here, as it intimates not only a system or pattern produced by God, but also a living, vital fluid that connects these systems to the rest of the organic world. The soldiers need not know one another; through their very embodiedness, they share a common heartbeat, a heartbeat that Dobell

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\* For more about Dobell's religious background, see Emma Mason, "Rhythmic Numinousness: Sydney Dobell and 'The Church'", in *Victorian Poetry* 42:4.

attempted to communicate through poetry. Through physiological similarities, Dobell attempted to elicit sympathy for those far away, both geographically and socio-economically.

Yet despite the attempts of poets like Dobell, the body quickly broke down as a site for connection during this war: a war fought far away geographically as well as emotionally.

## **Transcending War**

Most readers of the *London Times* would have conceived of soldiers as

...miserable. It was expected that army recruits would be drawn from the lowest social classes in the British Isles, and that they could be held in line only by the toughest discipline. The soldier was regarded and treated alternately as a criminal to be punished with flogging and as a child whose every action should be watched and guarded.<sup>14</sup>

According to Nightingale herself in *Studies in Nursing*, “It should never be forgotten that the soldier is a very peculiar individual, old and stern as is his trade... the soldier is what, amidst all his faults, he has been made by the habit and spirit of discipline...relax discipline, and in proportion as you do so, there remains of the soldier a being with as much or more of the brute than the man.”<sup>15</sup> Along similar lines, Nightingale felt threatened by anything animalistic, any “uncivilized” behavior. Although Nightingale complains about soldiers and nurses drinking, Mary Poovey has convincingly argued that “drinking” here could be a euphemism for many unwanted sexual behaviorisms: “Remember,” Nightingale writes, “there is such a thing as quiet drinking, as well as noisy drinking...It is best that the nurse’s door should command the view of those who come in our out of the lavatory, and in and out of the water-closet. This whole section...is both ugly and important.”<sup>16</sup> The nurse becomes an agent of discipline, policing soldiers as they use the water-closet or the lavatory, looking out for any signs of animalistic behaviors. According to Sally Mitchell, this was not unique to Nightingale; “Discipline was harsh. Flogging was the punishment [for soldiers] even for minor offenses until 1881.”<sup>17</sup> Clearly, this emphasis on discipline and morality implies a moral lack, or even an infantilization, that allows for the transcendence of doctors and nurses.

While the *Times* and other media venues gave accounts of individual soldiers’ experiences, the majority of poetry readers preferred not to focus on the soldiers or even their bodily suffering. Florence Nightingale was (and has since been)

portrayed by the media (and by herself) as an angelic individual selflessly catering to common soldiers. Yet this portrayal is a rhetorical avenue intended to elevate the medical professional by constructing patients as lower. Thus it is the doctor/nurse who transcends over the patient, assuming a mythological status to gain reverence from the reader. Most poems dealing with surgeons or nurses during the Crimean War focus mostly on the caretaker, using patients simply as props to evince that caretaker's divine nature.<sup>18</sup> Thus the patients fade from the picture, leaving readers with a heroic figure to emulate or mythologize.

Over and over again, Crimean War poems emphasize the divine—the otherworldly or even iconic—elements of doctors, surgeons, and nurses to help the reader detach from the senseless lower-class suffering of war. As Thomas Rommel, the only literary critic to have studied Crimean war poems as a genre, argues, “death and suffering are almost universally portrayed from a distance.”<sup>19</sup> Isa Craig-Knox (1831-1903) wrote a poem about the Sisters of Mercy, the Catholic French sisters who, especially before the entrance of Nightingale and her crew, helped attend to wounded soldiers. Of note here is the focus on the Sisters as not only closer to the divine, but also of a higher social class:

The Abbess near the altar knelt, and led the praying  
band,  
High-born she was, and beautiful, a lady of the land:  
“Sisters, now let us pray,” she said, “for all our  
prayers who need,  
For each soul that shall pass away, for each heart  
that shall bleed,  
Whether it be of friend or foe, of true or hostile  
creed.”

While this section of “The Sisters of Mercy” seems to emphasize a universal sympathy—“whether it be friend or foe, of true or hostile creed”—class also becomes important here. Craig-Knox finds it important to tell her readers that the Abbess is “high-born,” “a lady of the land.” As an individual of high class and sensibility, she can reach a detachment from human suffering because she can transcend the material limits of the body.

Craig-Knox's poem alternates between sympathy for the soldiers' bodily pain and a desire to detach from that pain through a “higher” connection:

And now they search the valley through, among the  
heaps of slain,  
Guided by cries of agony, and groans of mortal pain,  
To where, amid his comrades dead, the wounded  
soldier lay,  
Who marvell'd in life's parting trance what angel  
forms were they,  
Shedding a light upon his face like mercy's holy ray.

Again, some of her imagery parallels the spasmodic poets' tactics: we see the "heaps of slain," and we hear "cries of agony" and "groans of mortal pain." Unlike the detached, anesthetized patient, these soldiers physiologically evince their pain, forcing the Sisters and, through them, the readers, to feel sympathy for them. Yet the divine imagery also pervades this poem; the sisters are "angel forms," and the light of their lamps shines like "mercy's holy ray."

In her 1855 *War Lyrics*, Arabella Shore reiterates much of this imagery in her poem, "The Good Physician," written for a physician who died while serving soldiers on the battlefield:

Thou God's true soldier! take thy place with those  
Fall'n children of renown!  
No swordsman fighting off a crowd of foes,  
Toiled for a braver crown  
Than thou, meek Duty's knight, who on thine arms lay'st  
down.

The very first line apostrophizes the physician, paradoxically calling him "God's true soldier" and asking him to join other "fall'n children of renown." Perhaps Shore here refers to saints, or to other healers who have likewise sacrificed for their patients. Perhaps she refers here to Christ, often called the "Good Physician."<sup>20</sup> In line with the Christ imagery, we are also given the image of the "braver crown," again juxtaposed with the image of the doctor as a soldier: "meek Duty's knight." The crown recalls the crown of thorns worn by a suffering Jesus, and the soldier imagery links the doctor to the medieval chivalric tradition. Both lift the doctor into the realm of mythology, allowing for the reader to detach from suffering.

One of the images often associated with healers is that of resurrection, or re-birth, and we see this in the following stanza:

All day from Death's dumb heaps dost thou untomb  
Life that but breathes in sighs,  
Amongst departing souls, through night's long gloom,  
Move thy true ministries,  
Where none sleep save the dead, and wide wake danger's eyes.

The physician (like Jesus with Lazarus) “untombs” life from “death’s dumb heaps”; here, Shore’s alliteration serves to emphasize the heaviness of death, followed by the higher, more hopeful sound of the word “untomb.” Yet the physical realities of war are not forgotten; “untomb” rhymes here with “gloom,” and life still only “breathes in sighs.” Although the physician here is capable of creating detachment, Shore still works to balance that with sympathy for the dying soldiers.

However, this sympathy for dying soldiers erodes as we approach the large set of poems written in tribute to Nightingale, the “lady with the lamp.” Here, the divine elements of Nightingale’s character trump any physiological connection with soldiers, representing almost complete detachment from the war itself. The notion of the lamp itself has Biblical connotations; Proverbs 6:23 uses this metaphor to provide another representation of discipline and instruction: “For the commandment is a lamp; and the law is light; and reproofs of instruction are the way of life” (King James version). This notion of discipline and “instruction” reverberates over and over again in both textual and graphic representations of Nightingale. Harriet Martineau, writing a very premature obituary in 1856, writes that “we think of her dressing wounds, bringing wine and food, carrying the lamp through miles of sick soldiers in the middle of the night, noting every face, and answering the appeal of every eye as she passed. We think of her . . . stocking her coffee-house with luxuries and innocent pleasures, to draw the soldiers away from poisonous drinks and mischief.”<sup>21</sup> While Martineau’s rhetoric has her “noting every face” and “answering every appeal,” we quickly transition to the notion of Nightingale as an instructor or disciplinarian, providing “innocent” pleasures and “draw[ing] the soldiers away from poisonous drinks and mischief.” With her lamp of instruction, she elevates the soldiers above their brute status and achieves (in the eyes of the reader) a sort of divine presence. Here, for instance, is one of the many archetypal images of Nightingale:



[Figure 1: Florence Nightingale, The Illustrated London News]

Aside from the uniform and the lamp brightly shining in the (spiritual) darkness, we see a few beds, some stocked with roughly-sketched patients. However, the patients are not important here: what catches the viewer's attention is Nightingale herself.

Many works of art focus on Florence Nightingale, and color is often the avenue by which they highlight her "divinity." In "Florence Nightingale Receiving the Wounded at Scutari," Jerry Barrett uses the light thrown on Nightingale herself to invest her with and a sense of other-worldliness:



[Figure 2: Jerry Barrett, Florence Nightingale Receiving the Wounded at Scutari]

Here, light shines on Florence Nightingale's face, illuminating her amidst a group of dark, undemarcated soldiers. This light connects her with the bright blue sea and sky, both symbols of rebirth and salvation; the blue color also importantly ties Florence Nightingale to the image of the Virgin Mary, whose signature color was blue.

Poetry about Florence Nightingale almost uniformly emphasizes her divinity and her other-worldly aspects; not surprisingly, these conform with Victorian gender ideals like virginity and purity. In Sir Edward Arnold's 1854 "Florence Nightingale," the poet attempts to justify his clumsy rhyming by elevating Nightingale herself above such concerns:

If on this verse of mine  
Those eyes shall ever shine,  
Whereto sore-wounded men have looked for life,  
Think not that for a rhyme,  
Nor yet to fit the time,  
I name thy name,—true Victress in this strife!

But let it serve to say  
That, when we kneel to pray,  
Prayers rise for thee thine ear shall never know;  
And that thy gallant deed,  
For God, and for our need,  
Is in all hearts, as deep as love can go.

Nightingale's eyes, like her famed lamp, would "shine" on Arnold's verse, and England's ("we") actions are equally religious: the masses "kneel to pray" and "prayers rise" above earth, to the otherworldly realm where Nightingale exists. Incidentally, Arnold chooses a Petrarchan sonnet for his rhymes, conveniently conflating Nightingale with Petrarch's also other-worldly Laura. In this case, the other world is a Christian heaven, and this discourse continues in the rest of the poem:

Oh great heart! raised like city on a hill;  
Oh watcher! worn and pale,  
Good Florence Nightingale,  
Thanks, loving thanks, for thy large work and will!  
England is glad of thee—  
Christ, for thy charity,  
Take thee to joy when hand and heart are still!

While Arnold does give us a few physiological details—"worn and pale"—these only correspond to the delicate invalidism expected of Victorian women. He also mentions Christ's reward for Nightingale's "charity." Most interesting in this stanza is the allusion to her heart "raised like a city on a hill." Apart from the spatial metaphor, again placing Nightingale above ordinary humans, this references Jesus in Matthew 5:14, when he tells his listeners, "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden." Again, images of light and elevation raise Nightingale above the body, allowing for Arnold's readers to look (literally) up to her and detach from wartime suffering.

Martin Tupper Farquhar's sonnet "To Florence Nightingale" also resounds with hagiographical and Mariological imagery.

If ever saint obey'd the great command,  
Leave all and follow Me; if ever heart

Acted in love the high and holy part  
 Of good Samaritan from land to land,—  
 That praise is thine, O Lady! and thou art  
 Truly the crown of Christian womanhood,  
 With tender eye and ministering hand  
 Going about like Jesus doing good  
 Among the sick and dying: what a scene  
 Of wounds and writhing pain and hideous throes  
 For thee to dwell in,—O thou martyr-Queen,  
 Calm dove of peace amid war's vulture woes,  
 Soothing their fury by thy looks serene,  
 And lulling agony to deep repose!

Again, the sonnet is Petrarchan, with the realities of the war only coming in at the last sestet. Farquhar immediately aligns her with a “saint,” a “high” and “holy” “Good Samaritan.” Ironically, Nightingale’s avid desire to leave her repressive family and obtain an occupation (see *Cassandra*) is here read as obeisance to Jesus’s “great command.” With more poetical finesse than Arnold, Farquhar here enjambes the line “Going about like Jesus doing Good” with the beginning of the sestet, “among the sick and dying.” This only intensifies the discord between Nightingale’s saintly persona and the gruesome realities of war. Farquhar does leave his metaphysical musings and mentions “wounds and writhing pain and hideous throes”; the alliteration as well as long vowel sounds here create an almost onomatopoeic effect, placing us back into the realm of the spasmodics. Yet this only lasts for a second, as Nightingale’s influence wins out over such bodily things. A “calm dove of peace,” she “soothes” their fury and “lulls” agony away. In addition to the Biblical allusion about the “dove,” the Nightingale figure “soothes” and “lulls” soldiers like a mother would her child. By allowing the reader to focus on Nightingale almost exclusively, and to place her in a metaphysical space with angels, saints, and Christ, Farquhar enables his readers to detach from the writhing soldiers and to co-exist with Nightingale in an otherworldly space.

Sydney Dobell and Alexander Smith, in their 1855 *Sonnets on the War*, employ similar strategies to portray Florence Nightingale as divine, above human suffering.<sup>22</sup> Smith’s title, “Miss Nightingale,” emphasizes the fact that she never married, preferring a profession over the Victorian “Angel of the House” role. This discourse of purity and virginity can, of course, also tie Nightingale back to a virginal Christ...or to his mother:

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,  
 Lingerin' o'er this year's half-forgotten page,  
 Shall see its beauty smiling over there;  
 Surprised to tears his beating heart he stills,  
 Like one who finds among Athenian hills  
 A Temple like a lily white and fair.

A variation on a Petrarchan sonnet, this poem does, in spasmodic fashion, incorporate physiological imagery: the soldier's tearful heart "expanding" contrasts with the reader's "beating heart" which "stills" when reading of Nightingale's exploits. In some ways, this tactic connects Smith's temporally and spatially removed reader to the suffering soldier.

Nonetheless, the adoration for Nightingale is clearly more central in this poem. Interestingly, the "fallen Englishmen" "bloomed and faded in Crimean flowers" have become mere organic matter, soil, but Nightingale's "perfect charity unsoiled shall stand." Although some maternal imagery comes in here—her "healing face" and "dewy hand" provide succor—the chief image of this sonnet is one of purity, as accentuated by the last line. Among the ruins of Athens, Nightingale is a Temple (a devotional site) "like a lily white and fair." Not coincidentally, the lily in Christian mythology stands for chastity and virtue and is most often associated with the Virgin Mary. Also not coincidentally, Victorians during this time engaged in a debate about whether the Virgin Mary could be viewed as an iconic Victorian woman: "virginal," "sinless," and a "model mother."<sup>23</sup> Here, Nightingale takes on all of these qualities, replacing her own lack of a family with a pure, sinless mothering of anonymous soldiers.<sup>24</sup> And it is she, not the soldiers, who remain sinless and, more importantly, sympathized-with.

Today, almost two centuries after the events of the Crimean War, we still *want* to sympathize with the bodily experiences of soldiers, reading books like Tim O'Brien's *The Things they Carried* or watching movies like *The Hurt Locker* in an

attempt to sympathize with wars that were—and are—still “at a distance.” We watch news footage of injured troops, often accompanied by haunting music, and wonder how they might feel. And, yet, often, the distance is just too great, and the soldier’s body simply cannot be a site for sympathy. Pain—especially other people’s pain—is terribly difficult to put into words or even on screen. Thus we, like countless Crimean War poets, look outside of the suffering soldiers to mythical figures: caretakers, leaders, purple heart recipients, and other heroes imbued with divine qualities. In our literature, movies, and news footage, we look for the heroic, the more-than-human, to detach from the suffering inherent in the spectacle of war.

## Notes

1. “Leader,” *The London Times*, October 1854.
2. Favret argues that modern warfare—war “at a distance”—produces either abstractions, “an increasing distance from the human body”; or a numbness, a “defeat of human responsiveness” (Favret 10). Yet Favret also outlines a third option, a “poetic or aesthetic response, a response that strives to give form to feeling” (Favret 10). She aligns abstractions with a lack of temporality, a move toward the historical past as well as the future, and she aligns her aesthetic response with the discourse of affect. I find these terms productive, especially when mapped onto the medical poetry of the Crimean War: that is, poetry written about doctors, surgeons, and, increasingly, nurses.
3. I examine these in my forthcoming manuscript regarding eighteenth- and nineteenth-century medical poems and their negotiations between sympathy and detachment.
4. Stephanie Markovits, *The Crimean War in the British Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7-8.
5. Joseph Baylen and Alan Conway, eds., *Soldier-Surgeon: The Crimean War Letters of Dr. Douglas A. Reid, 1855-56* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1968), 11.
6. *Ibid.*, 13-14.
7. William Fergusson, *Notes and Recollections of a Professional Life, by the Late William Fergusson, Esq. M.D. Inspector General of Military Hospitals.*, ed. James Fergusson (London: Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1846), 57-58.
8. Markovits, *The Crimean War in the British Imagination*, 8.
9. Martha Westwater, *The Spasmodic Career of Sydney Dobell* (London: University Press of America, 1992), 103.
10. Sydney Dobell, *The Poetical Works of Sydney Dobell*, ed. John Nichol. (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1875), 106.

11. Richard C Allen, *David Hartley on Human Nature* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999), 102.
12. Emma Mason, "Rhythmic Numinousness: Sydney Dobell and 'The Church,'" *Victorian Poetry* 42:4 (2004), 539.
13. Sydney Dobell, *Thoughts on Art, Philosophy, and Religion: Selected from the Unpublished Papers of Sydney Dobell* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1876), 25.
14. Donald Gordon, *The Moment of Power: Britain's Imperial Epoch* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1970), 75.
15. Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 181.
16. Qtd. In Poovey 181.
17. Mitchell, *Daily Life in Victorian England* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009), 279.
18. For the purposes of this paper, I have intentionally left out spasmodic poems, poems that attempted to connect to wounded soldiers by proposing an intrinsic bodily, rhythmic connection among all human beings. For more information about the spasmodics, please see *Victorian Poetry's* special issue (42:4) on the topic.
19. Thomas Rommel, "Florence Nightingale and the Role of the Individual Soldier," in *War and the Cultural Construction of Identities in Britain*, ed. Barbara Korte (New York: Rodopi, 2002), 110.
20. "Christ is the Good Physician. There is no disease He cannot heal; no sin He cannot remove; no trouble He cannot help. He is the Balm of Gilead, the Great Physician who has never yet failed to heal all the spiritual maladies of every soul that has come unto Him in faith and prayer," James H. Augey, accessed via [http://www.giga-usa.com/quotes/topics/christ\\_t001.htm](http://www.giga-usa.com/quotes/topics/christ_t001.htm).
21. Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*, 164.
22. While one edition of these sonnets lists Dobell as the primary author, a pamphlet edition (the only one which contains this poem) is by Alexander Smith and "the author of Balder." It may be possible that this poem, "Florence Nightingale" was written by Smith and only placed in this edition (London: David Bogue, Fleet Street). I will thus refer to Smith as the author here.
23. Carol Herringer, *Victorians and the Virgin Mary: religion and gender in England, 1830-1885* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2008), 20.
24. In *Victorians and the Virgin Mary*, Carol Herringer convincingly argues that Anglo-Catholics transposed Victorian qualities onto the relatively obscure Biblical figure. Because the Catholic Virgin was so prominent and thwarted the Victorian public/private sphere distinction, the ideals of motherhood were increasingly emphasized. John Henry Newman famously argued that the idea "of St. Mary having children after our Lord is horrible...the idea was monstrous" Ibid., 47.. Herringer goes on to comment that "the Catholic belief that Mary was ever-virgin was congruent in some ways with their temporal culture's high valuation of female virginity" (49). In his recent biography, Mark Bostridge also notes that, especially since Nightingale flouted traditional gender roles by purposely not marrying and by leaving her over-protective family, it was important to recuperate her image as one confirming "woman's acceptance of a religious-based role, ministering to the sick and wounded in imitation of Christ." Mark Bostridge, *Florence Nightingale: The Making of an Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 275.

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