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Regarding War and Marriage: Romanticism and Everyday Experience

War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime. Mary A. Favret. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010. 280 pp.

Marriage, Writing and Romanticism: Wordsworth and Austen After War. Eric C. Walker. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009. 304 pp.

Reviewed by Stefanie Markovits, Yale University

<1> As a recent issue of *PMLA* devoted to the subject attests (October 2009), a decade of wartime has given rise to renewed interest in the ability of literature to make sense of the experience of war. Two new books approach this topic by looking back to a past era of seemingly endless conflict: that of the Napoleonic wars, a period overlapping significantly with the age of what has come to be called Romanticism. Both these books also keep one foot squarely in the present. In *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime*, Mary A. Favret argues passionately yet lucidly that "In an age where even distant calamity plays out right before our eyes, the ethical value of distance demands reconsideration" (196). Her own musings on British Romantic responses to a distant war — in poetry and prose, fiction and non-fiction, verbal and visual media — succeed at "open[ing] up correspondence between realms otherwise divided by the temporal and spatial mapping of historicism" (198). Similarly, Eric C. Walker, whose interest is not so much in war as in what happens in war's aftermath, argues in *Marriage, Writing and Romanticism: Wordsworth and Austen After War* that when the Napoleonic wars finally ended in 1815, the renewed focus on marriage offered the opportunity to consider and contest what he calls the "empire of conjugality": the still-persistent idea that marriage is "the only game in town" (7). These two books, while set against the backdrop of war, are nevertheless products of the deeply felt conviction that art matters because it helps us make sense of "everyday" experience, a category crucial to both Favret and Walker, although they gloss it somewhat differently.

<2> Favret turns to the everyday to make sense of the experience of wartime, a concept she considers in all its temporal richness. The turn occurs when she shifts the focus from revolution — a cataclysmic event — to the comparatively *longue durée* of the Napoleonic wars. As she puts it, this shift entails a shift in aesthetics, too, away from the "spectacular and sublime" and toward the quotidian: "When war is not an event but a condition, then its distinction from peace becomes harder to see; in a militarized society, in other words, it may always be

wartime" (38-39). The implications for "Romanticism" are thus significant and are suggested also by the works on which she focuses. While she invokes an incredibly broad range of texts, both primary and theoretical, her thoughts keep circling back to a few touchstones, most prominently, Cowper's reflections in *The Task* (1785), as he sits at his hearth on a snowy winter's evening, musing on the significance of the post-boy's appearance during a time of war. What one notices right away is how removed this poem is from standard conceptions of war poetry, but that remove is, for Favret, precisely what makes the poem such a compelling expression of the affect (a key concept throughout) of "war at a distance." While Favret does consider more obviously martial texts, such as the journals of the British sailor John Wetherell, she is far more interested in how the war enters stealthily into familiar experience, as though — to turn to one of her favorite metaphors for wartime — its footsteps were muffled by a blanket of snow.(1) This focus affects Favret's approach to texts, also, and anyone looking for full "readings" will be disappointed. Her discussion hovers above the texts she considers, touching down at relevant points. But the method never feels scattershot: indeed, one might say she hones in on her targets with military precision.

<3> Favret's essentially lyrical sensibility manifests itself in the structure of her book, where chapters (organized by theme) are interspersed by shorter essays she names "interludes." (The first of these, the wonderful rumination "Still Winter Falls," appeared in different form in that recent *PMLA* issue.) The chapters themselves, though, are hardly less lyrical, circling as they do around their central concepts and texts. After an introductory chapter, setting up many of the key concepts to which she will be returning, chapter 2 focuses on how war alters our sense of the passage of time to such a degree that it becomes possible to think of a category called "wartime." Crucial to this — especially before the advent of modern media technologies — is the experience of waiting: waiting (like Cowper) for the next piece of news to arrive, even as one knows that (given the slow passage of the post) news will be out of date the moment it arrives. Favret names this temporal no-man's-land "the meantime": "they wait, but wait belatedly" (76). But she also notes a countering prophetic strain in the war literature, a strain that becomes implicated in the ideology of empire, allowing time to "serve[] not only as a medium but as an instrument of war" (96). Chapter 3 slides (via the bridging interlude about winter) from thinking about time to thinking about the weather. Favret historicizes her discussion by describing the newly global conception of weather patterns, a conception that allows weather to serve as a metaphor for faraway conflicts even as it shows readers how "distant warfare might invade, inform, and reshape daily life" (120). Modern meteorological developments joined with a renewed interest in Virgilian georgics, where weather served as a medium of communication between the divine and the working farmer, to "offer[] a physics of global communication" (134). But this physics is colored by affective response: the weather, which comes to us from a distance, also lets us *feel* distant events.

<4> Chapter 4 switches modes to look more closely at a single primary work — Jane Austen's *Persuasion* — as a rumination on the experience of "everyday war" (the reading is flanked by a critical history of the everyday, ranging from Lefebvre to Cavell, and reflections on Wetherell's published diary). The shift from lyric to narrative is significant here (although Favret makes less of it than she might), as part of her interest lies in the experience of duration, of prolonged suffering, that is antithetical to lyric but essential to narrative. Favret turns to *Persuasion* (1818) because, set as it is during the "false peace" of 1814, Austen's novel demonstrates what Foucault

has called “the continuation of war by other means”: “the postwar everyday maintains under the veneer of peace the work of war even after its formal end” (149). “Anne Elliot cannot find peace in peacetime” (162), but that is because there is no such thing as peacetime; as trauma theory asserts, “war invades the mind,” forcing Anne into what the conclusion of the novel recognizes as, in Favret’s words, “a mode of living everyday as if she were at war” (170). Favret’s final chapter switches not only genre but medium, turning to visual representations of war. Once again, she mostly forgoes analysis of overtly martial painting in favor of more oblique representations of war, images that insist on their distance from the home front, even meditate upon the experience of that distance. Such images, she suggests, are especially important to consider in an age where modern technology brings war into our living rooms (although Romantic-era panorama appears as a forerunner technology, offering a similarly “assaulting logic” of “the historical sublime” [219]). Her argument culminates in a discussion of William and Thomas Daniell’s *The Rope Bridge of Serinagur* (1812-16), an image of a distant fortress under siege, from which an escape route, in the guise of a fragile rope bridge, has been erected. This suspended bridge becomes a figure for suspense (will it hold?) and suspension (in time), as well as a metaphor for the tenuous bridge between battlefront and home front. In effect, the picture advocates a “cosmopolitan view,” one “acknowledging a world of potential upheavals and dispossessions” (226), one that asks for the sympathy of identification even as it recognizes the inevitability of separation.

<5> What makes Favret’s wonderful book so moving (not a term that one ordinarily applies to works of literary criticism) is its tone of genuine inquiry, indeed sometimes the acknowledgement of uncertainty. Part of that uncertainty seems predicated on the surprising difficulty of defining war itself, a point she considers in another of the interludes, “A Brief History of the Meaning of War.” But the power of her account also comes from its extraordinarily porous — and yet always nuanced — historical sense. “Timely” seems a strange word to use of a book that in some ways argues against too discrete conceptions of time. Perhaps we might rather call the book “meantimely.”

<6> Eric Walker’s *Marriage, Writing and Romanticism* moves the focus of concern from the perpetual empire of war to the perpetual “empire of conjugality” (a category he also glosses via Cavell’s everyday). Thus (to turn to the most obvious, indeed frequently uncanny, point of overlap between these two books) if Favret argues that *Persuasion* shows “the marriage of war and the everyday” (147), Walker uses Austen’s novel to argue that “after war,” marriage becomes the locus of everyday experience. Walker’s book’s more specific historical argument about the postwar is premised on the claim that the advent of the Peace after Waterloo brought a renewed interest in matters conjugal, a “postwar marriage boom in the culture at large” (139). He grounds this claim with reference to multiple royal and aristocratic weddings, the various scandals surrounding the Regent’s marriage to Queen Caroline, and a biographical argument about Wordsworth: that his visit to Paris in 1819, introducing his French daughter Caroline to his wife Mary, inaugurated a renewed focus on the subject of marriage in his poetry. This interest, Walker suggests, bore ephemeral fruit in the 1819 “C-stage” revision of *The Prelude* and in what Walker calls Wordsworth’s “fugitive” 1820 “third volume” of marriage verse, which included the *River Duddon* sonnets, *Vaudracour and Julia*, the *Thanksgiving Ode* volume from 1816, *Peter Bell*, and *The Waggoner* (its contents were soon dismantled and rearranged by Wordsworth). Similarly, Walker argues that Austen’s postwar involvement with the Prince Regent (to whom she was

encouraged to dedicate *Emma* [1816]) led to a more critical stance towards and reconceptualization of marriage; indeed he views the end of the war as a crucial marker dividing Austen's early and late works.

<7> One of the great pleasures of Walker's book comes in the detailed tour through philosophical accounts of marriage, ranging from Hegel, to Kierkegaard, to Cavell, that occupies his first two chapters. Central to Walker's account is the astute perception that marriage causes a "representational crisis": on the one hand, it is "the only tale to tell"; on the other hand, "it is a tale that is untellable" (4-5). To find a way out of this conceptual labyrinth, Walker turns to the idea of *indifference* (something Favret also considers in relation to the uneasy tensions produced by the Daniells' *Rope Bridge* [228]), which he uses to signify "forms of writing that work in fugitive ways outside the forensic borders of the marriage culture" (23). Chapter 3 turns then to Austen's and Wordsworth's postwar writings to argue that while the "representational system demands conjugal harmony as a sign of victory and peace" (75), these authors provide rather instances of indifference, as in (for instance) Wordsworth's refusal to celebrate Wellington's name in his Waterloo poems (the Duke was notoriously unfaithful to his wife). Walker's suggestive reading of the excursion to Box Hill in *Emma* as a battle *manqué* struck me as curiously aligned with Favret's observations about the pervasion of war into everyday experience, even in peacetime. And his meditations on how *Persuasion* uses its complex temporality (both locally and at the level of the sentence) to hint that marriage needs to be viewed not as a onetime event but as an ongoing negotiation, as a matter of endless repetition or "*remarriage*" (8), provides an alternative sense of how Austen's book conceptualizes the everyday.

<8> Chapters 4 and 5 contest the empire of marriage by considering two alternative models of intimate relations: sibling relationships and friendship. In the case of both authors, this perspective allows significant biographical emphasis, and the closeness of both Austen and Wordsworth with their sisters offers particularly suggestive overlap. Walker traces the uneasy ways in which Austen's postwar sibling relationships tend to be sacrificed to the courtship plot (like William Price is in *Mansfield Park* [1814]). And in Wordsworth's poetry, he considers how in the postwar period, revisions to the poems allow us to see Mary taking over Dorothy's and Coleridge's functions as muses or partners in the conversations of the poems. Many of the readings are grounded in close analysis of the use of specific terms: *sink*, *rest*, *cottage*. Thus he argues, for example, postwar changes in the cultural conceptions attached to the idea of the cottage "shifted [the term] from an exclusively economic signifier to a complex mix of the economic and [conjugally] affective" (105). (I rather missed a discussion of "The Ruined Cottage" here, which seems to consider this shift in a wartime rather than a postwar context.) But if Coleridge and Dorothy are increasingly written out of Wordsworth's early poetry by his postwar revisions, Mrs. Smith's surprising tenacity in *Persuasion* (especially her prominence in the novel's final paragraphs) offers the hint that Austen is trying to fight back to regain some territory for non-conjugal affection.

<9> Walker's final chapter brings together many of the strands of his argument under the appropriately hegemonic single-word title: "Marriage." The core term joining Wordsworth and Austen here is *ease*, and the core claim is that the postwar works register that peace brings less

ease than one might predict; indeed that these authors recognize that marriage needs to be understood as a state of “risk” (197) — or, as Favret implies, as a continuation of wartime by other means. Walker offers a long-promised linchpin reading of “To —— ,” an 1819 blank verse poem (this poem is his version of Favret’s post-boy episode in *The Task*). He argues both that Mary Wordsworth is the unidentified recipient of the apostrophe and that Wordsworth’s refusal to name her is key to his complex conception of postwar marriage. With Austen, Walker turns to *Emma* and *Sanditon* to show how even minds “lively and at ease” in the peace of postwar culture find themselves subject to restlessness and the occasional overturning, whether of carriages or opinions.

<10> Like Favret, Walker circles around his core texts, returning with particular frequency to a few favorites. The associative method can feel bewildering, especially when coupled with an allusive style that while pleasurable can also be confusing (the repeated reference to conjugal “bowers of bliss” rather jostled with my understanding of Spenser). And the tenuousness of Walker’s concept of indifference, which seems to serve as marker for a questioning stance towards marriage rather than a genuine alternative to conjugality, aggravates this problem. Moreover, as with Favret, I wish there were more attention here to genre, to the differences between considering marriage within the framework of the courtship plot, narrative verse (epic or ballad), and lyric. I also felt that it would have been helpful to think harder about the distinctions between the stories of courtship that drive Austen’s plots and the pictures of marriage that punctuate them. Readers of this journal might have hoped, too, for more attention to gender, which gets relatively scant notice given the focus on marriage. (I might note here that Favret offers no sustained interrogation of gender relations in war.) Nevertheless, Walker’s meticulous attention to an often-overlooked section of Wordsworth’s oeuvre is much appreciated. And his perceptive readings of Austen give further evidence that she belongs among the Romantics.(2)

<11> I am, however, less convinced by the “after war” part of his argument — in part because, as Favret so convincingly shows, and as Walker himself often suggests, the kind of wartime to emerge from the Napoleonic wars was unlikely to run out soon. In any case, Austen had always written courtship plots, and if her attitudes to marriage do shift in the later works, the end of the war is, I suspect, but one of many grounds (including the obvious biographical ones) of this shift. Similarly, to attribute Wordsworth’s increased interest in marriage to the peace seems to me to oversimplify matters. Might not Mary Wordsworth’s growing influence over her husband owe something to the duration of their marriage, for example? Moreover, while as Walker puts it, war may be there “To make the world safe for conjugality” (71), Spenser’s “fierce warres and faithfull loves” (or Byron’s “fierce loves and faithless wars”) — not to mention the *Iliad*’s poignant depictions of Hector and Andromache — attest to how attention to marriage and war have always gone hand-in-hand in literature. Still, Walker’s more pressing concern is less about postwar culture than about marriage culture more broadly understood, and here his argument is both timely and (given the enduring hegemony of marriage culture) timeless.

Endnotes

(1)One might contrast not only treatments of overtly military literature but also Stephen Behrendt's recent account of "Women Poets during the Wartime Years" in *British Women Poets and the Romantic Writing Community* (2009), many of whom depicted the sufferings of the families of fallen or absent soldiers and sailors. While Favret does consider such works as Wordsworth's "The Ruined Cottage," her greater concern is for what war means to those of us with more tenuous connections to the events abroad.(^)

(2)Other recent treatments of Austen as a Romantic writer include Clara Tuite's *Romantic Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), William Deresiewicz's *Jane Austen and the Romantic Poets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), and Favret's book.(^)