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Mary A. Favret, War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime: a Review

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Mary A. Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime*
(Princeton University Press, 2010) ix + 262 \$60; \$26.95 ppr.

A Review by Noel Jackson
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Mary Favret's *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* is a brilliant, beautifully written book on the experience of war in British Romantic writing. Offering intricate close readings of Cowper, Wordsworth, Austen, Coleridge, and others, Favret situates these canonical writers in relation to large historical contexts: writings in a prophetic mode by Robert Brothers and Captain Charles W. Pasley, 18th century weather history, and British paintings of colonial India, to name a few. Beyond the texts and images of the Romantic period. *War at a Distance* moves with impressive sweep between wartimes past and present, from the Revolution and Napoleonic conflicts of two centuries ago to the first and second Gulf Wars of the 20th and 21st centuries. *War at a Distance* is a stirring and powerful meditation on what it means to live in a time of war.

The *Modern Wartime* of the title refers principally to the experience of being a remote witness to war and its devastating consequences. This experience began with the authors of the late 18th and early 19th centuries for whom, Favret writes, "military conflict took place almost constantly, but elsewhere, at a great remove" (122). Wartime is in this sense not an event or a series of events so much as it is a structuring condition of experience, a persistent background to daily life: "If in these works warfare itself occurs *at a distance*, outside and beyond our reach, the experience of wartime begins *here*, in such domestic settings: in the intimacies of the home and hearth, the wanderings of the mind, the interruptions and lapses – of time, knowledge, and feeling – that compose the everyday" (4). Romantic literature is often acclaimed for its unprecedented attention to the unremarkable occurrences of daily life; Favret illustrates how just beyond the everyday lurks dim forebodings of violence unfathomable and unspeakable, catastrophes of barely imaginable scope.

War at a Distance is divided into three parts: "Modern Wartime: Media and Affect," "Invasions," and "War in the World," with a Prelude, "A Winter's Evening";

two Interludes, "Still Winter Falls" and "A Brief History of the Meaning of War"; and a Coda, "Undone." The first part, "Modern Wartime," examines how war that cannot be apprehended directly is nevertheless felt. The first chapter, "A Sense of War," establishes an historical and theoretical vocabulary for the "oscillation between abstraction and intimacy" in modern wartime experience (25). In Chapter Two, "Telling Time in War," Favret focuses on the overlapping temporalities of war experience. The focal point of this chapter is an extended reading of Book IV of Cowper's *The Task*, a text to which Favret frequently returns throughout the book. As Favret argues, the speaker is touched in his private meditation by intimations of war from the outside world: safely lodged at hearth and home, the poet surveys distant lands through the medium of the news, catches snatches of voices speaking other tongues, and sees "strange visages express'd" in his fireplace. By giving voice to these fugitive, unsettling feelings, Romantic literature evokes "[t]he punctuated eventfulness within dailiness which organized the public's experience of distant war" (73).

The Prelude, which precedes the first part and the Coda especially establish links between Romantic and subsequent expressions of wartime experience. Moving gracefully in the Prelude between C.K. Williams, Cowper, Coleridge, and others, Favret illustrates and beautifully evokes the "unsettled and unsettling temporality" of war (5). The Interlude "Still Winter Falls," which follows the first part, examines poetic figurations of war in and as scenes of falling snow. In poems by Cowper, James Thomson, Joseph Fawcett, Wordsworth, Mary Robinson, and others, Favret demonstrates how snowfall evokes a vision of war in its "tendency to limitlessness in scale and intensity" (100). That the snow continues to fall, and that the poet is still witness to its falling, are all that stand between the world as it is and the annihilating effects of what Carl von Clausewitz called "total war."

In Part II, "Invasions," Favret examines how distant war comes home to English spectators. Chapter Three, "War in the Air" traces an 18th century transformation in understandings of weather from a static and local phenomenon to something changeable, predictable, and potentially global in its reach. When meteorology thus becomes "a science of anticipation rather than recollection" (133),

Favret argues, a new historical significance is attached to watching the skies, whether in fear, hope, or resignation. The cloud that appears over a war-torn portion of the Continent may make an appearance over England in a few days; “prognostication becomes a science of history-in-the-making as much as a science of the weather” (137). In Chapter Four, “Everyday War,” Favret examines how the rhythms of daily life, its regularity and “eventlessness,” are conditioned by the trauma of war. Favret develops this argument through a nuanced discussion of 20th century theories of everyday life, and offers a fine reading of *Persuasion*, a novel in which scenes of tedium and deadening routine co-exist with various forms of accident and injury that befall the novel’s characters.

The third part of the book consists of a single long chapter on visual representations of war. Moving from textual to visual media, “Viewing War at a Distance” shifts the focus of the book from representations of mostly European conflict to scenes of colonial India at war in images by Robert Home, Robert Colebrook, and the uncle-and-nephew duo Thomas and William Daniells. The Indian landscapes that Favret reads are remarkably composed and placid, evoking the aesthetics of the picturesque. But Favret finds in these scenes a self-consciously distanced perspective, a “middle distance” as she calls it, which paradoxically draws viewers’ attention to scenes of disquiet and violence barely suggested by the images themselves. Favret concludes the chapter with a reading of the Daniells’ *The Rope Bridge at Serinagur*, first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1800. Far from suggesting a state of sovereign indifference to a world at war, *The Rope Bridge* limns the contours of an unsettled scene that could as easily be the viewer’s own. The Daniells’ image of peril, disorientation, and uncertainty is a striking visual emblem with which to conclude this powerful, persuasive, and compelling book.

In its attention to the lived experience of war, Favret’s book invites comparison to classic accounts of wartime experience, notably Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory*. *War at a Distance* is informed as well by recent scholarship on Romanticism and affect such as Kevis Goodman’s *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (Cambridge, 2004), which like Favret’s book makes *The Task* one of the central cases for how imaginative literature

mediates history through the language of affect and feeling. Though the physical sites of war are geographically remote, wartime summons powerfully unsettling feelings that resist conceptualization or containment.

Mary Favret's *War at a Distance* attends to the tumult that passes just out of reach of conscious apprehension; it attunes the reader to the sights and sounds of war passing beyond awareness. *War at a Distance* is a stunning achievement.