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4 "Right Against Wrong," *Punch* 26 (1854), 144.Courtesy of the Elizabethan Club, Yale University.


6 [Constantin Guys], "Turks Conveying the Sick to Balaclava," *Illustrated London News*, March 17, 1855, 260. Courtesy of the Watkinson Library, Trinity College, Hartford, CT.


8 [John Leech], "One of the Horrors of the Chobham War," *Punch* 25 (1853), 24. Courtesy of the Yale University Library.

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overlapping network of responses to the concept of the heroine during the war years that coalesced around her unavoidable figure. The conditions of the Crimean War may have damaged the very muscular form of heroism to which they had initially given birth. Amyas Leigh, a son of the conflict, was also blinded by it. But Aurora Leigh – like Margaret Hale and the other heroines of the war novels – offered a compensatory vision: not only of "heroic womanhood," but of a future "condition of England" in which the separate spheres of North and South, poor and rich, social worker and poet, novel and epic, and (above all) woman and man, have merged into one.

CHAPTER 3

"The song that nerves a nation's heart": the poetry of the Crimean War

While some of the novels discussed in chapter 2 conclude with unifying rhetoric, the genre itself resists this tendency. In contrast to the dialogism of the novel, though, war poetry – whether epic narrative or lyric song – traditionally works to bring voices together; one of its primary objectives is to ensure that a nation under threat marches in syncopated lockstep. But what happens when the war in question is an unpopular one, in which public awareness of bureaucratic bungling and general "blunder" (Tennyson picks up this word from a Times account in "The Charge of the Light Brigade") results in the toppling of a government? In this chapter, I will ask how the Victorians translated their response to such a conflict into verse. While earnestness generally precluded irony in favor of outrage, imaginative reactions to the war show nascent signs of ironic techniques we associate with the poetry of the First World War. Tennyson's "Charge" has been called "probably the last great battle piece that could be written in English"; although I will contest the straightforwardness implied by this designation, the Crimean War does represent a watershed moment.

Even before war erupted, mid-century Britain was a poetic battleground. Matthew Arnold's "Preface" to Poems (1853) had loudly lamented the absence of "great human action" in the work of modern poets; epic had received its death notice. Arnold and his friend and fellow poet Arthur Hugh Clough debated the proper roles for thought and action in poetry; both felt strongly that poetry had become too subjective, although they disagreed on the form of action required by the times (Arnold favored epic action located in the past, while Clough championed the kind of small-scale and modern action that Carlyle called work). Not incidentally, Clough's uneasy resolution to his poetic concerns has a Crimean connection: after the war, he decided to put verifying more-or-less to the side and to spend his time, instead, helping Florence Nightingale, his wife's cousin, as she tried to parlay her new-found Crimean celebrity into improvements in nursing on the home front.
The early 1890s also generated a related uproar about the growth of "spasmodic" poetry, lyrical outpourings that indulged in exploring interior life at the expense of external action — that whined rather than roared. The term gained prominence after Charles Kingsley used it in a review in November of 1853, just as conflict erupted in the East: like muscular Christianity, the spasmodic controversy arose from the same cultural conditions as the war. Kingsley's Elisey Vavasour of Two Years Ago, author of The Soul's Agonies, would have been recognized by a contemporary readership as a spasmodic poet. And while he avoided branding Tennyson's Maud (1855) with the label, Kingsley suggested his friend's poem suffered from the flaws of spasmodism (the ever-sensitive Tennyson seems even to have believed — incorrectly — that he had been used as a model for Vavasour). Others were less gentle, and Maud joined the ranks of works by fellow war poets Alexander Smith and Sydney Dobell to be burdened with the classification. In fact the war intensified these debates about poetry, as critics called for the birth of a modern Homer to transform the mess before them into something more exalted.

The increasing influence of the chivalric can be seen as an answer to this call, an attempt (like the war itself) to revive dying models of aristocratic militarism. But the necessary temporal doubleness associated with the chivalric, a mode that tries to bring the past into the present, allows for the opening of a critical space in which we can begin to find something akin to ironic response. Similarly, while the dramatic monologue — the other prominent poetic trend of the war years (Browning's Men and Women was published in 1854) — may present us with a single voice, it "presupposes a double awareness on the part of the author, an awareness which is the very essence of historicism. The dramatic monologist is aware of the relativity, the arbitrariness of any single life or way of looking at the world." In other words, the two major poetic methods of the day (often used in conjunction) were inherently open to similar instabilities.

To explore the difficult process of converting the experience of the Crimean War into patriotic poetry, I want to turn eventually to Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade" and Maud. But before considering the Laureate's efforts, I will give a sense of the poetic landscape within which Tennyson operated by exploring the war poems of less well-known writers: poets such as Adelaide Anne Procter and Arabella and Louisa Shore (whose distinctly female voices of war are notably absent in both poems by Tennyson), and Smith and Dobell (whose sonnets present a veritable cacophony of disjointed voices). Through their work, I will consider the problem of composing armchair poetry in time of war and the kind of moral quandary: how does one write without first-hand experience about a war that journalists and soldiers were recording from the thick of the action (see chapter 1)? But while journalism's dominance exerted significant pressures, these came atop a deeper epistemological problem created by the type of war it was: how does one write poetry about what one cannot understand not just for lack of personal experience, but because it does not fit into preconceived categories of experience? I take responses to the charge of the Light Brigade to be paradigmatic here: the bewilderment they express reflects the general confusion manifest by the war poetry (a product in part of those shifts in conceptions of the heroic discussed in chapter 2). Thus my readings of verses about the charge occupy the center of this chapter. The motif of the charge also brings me, inevitably, to Tennyson. Tennyson's two famous poems present remarkably dissimilar solutions to the problem of composing Crimean war verse. "The Charge," in which "All the world wondered" (lines 31, 52) seems to offer the unifying and heroic voice expected of martial and chivalric song, in contrast, Maud offers for all that it is a "monodrama," gives the reader a jarring experience of multiple voices. Paradoxically, while labeled spasmodic by critics, it was also denounced as warming one. Yet for all their formal diversity, when considered together these poems reveal notable areas of thematic overlap. In the work of the Poet Laureate, we can see the most complex negotiation of the terrain of patriotic martial verse from the midst of a war that was notoriously marked more by dissonance than by harmony.

1 THE POETIC (BATTLE-) FIELD

A poetry of sympathy

Poets of the Crimean War faced an obvious problem that was in essence an issue of sympathy: how to describe something so distant, so unfamiliar? The Romantics had installed the process of sympathy at the heart of poetry (hence the spasmodic tendency to use a first-person voice that thinly veiled — if at all — an autobiographical perspective). But war poetry, with its peculiar documentary demands, also makes peculiar demands of the sympathetic imagination: how dare one pretend to know what it was like? Crucially, the Crimean War poets were not soldiers — unlike the poets of World War I. Nor were they journalists, who were at least...
witness to the scene and subject to some of the dangers faced by troops in the Crimea.

Critics of the war poetry repeatedly contrasted the heroic virtues of men of arms with the more pacific virtues of men of words; Punch laughed at "our patriotic poets" for "shedding a little ink" instead of blood. But they also used the difference to mock poets for their imaginative excesses — or their lack of imagination, which rather oddly came down to the same thing. As E. B. Hamley, a Crimean officer and author (see chapter 1), remarked in a review of the war poetry in Blackwood's written from the front:

Scenes of the campaign glow and expand in the pictures of an imaginative "own correspondent" writing up to the requirements of an excited public. The poet, catching the enthusiasm, burns to sing of the war. Fancy and invention he need not call on for aid, as those elements of poetry have already done their utmost in the columns of the newspaper he subscribes to. Nothing is wanted but verse; and his eye, in a fine frenzy rolling, glances from the Times to a quire of foolscap, which he presently covers with ballads, sonnets, or some other form of lay, plaintive as the odes of Sappho, or sanguinary as the songs of Tyrtaeus. Notice how a journalist (William Howard Russell) is the Homer of his age; poetry derives from his sympathetic and "imaginative" labors at the scene of conflict. The poet’s "frenzy" is thus simultaneously a mark of excess and of sham; his own artistic labor boils down to mechanical translation of prose into verse.

Such focus on the armchair experience of war dominates responses to the war poetry. Consider Goldwin Smith’s review of "The War Passages in Maud" in the Saturday Review, in which poet and reader are jointly implicated in the perspective:

We do not, like the nations of antiquity to whom Tyrtaeus sung, literally go to war. We send our hired soldiers to attack a nation which may not be in need of the same regimen as ourselves. To most of us, the self-sacriﬁce involved in war with an enemy who cannot get us at consists in paying rather than taking taxes.

Here, Tyrtaeus stands as indicator of the antique efﬁcacy of war poetry: such song actually made people willing to die for the cause of Nation. But (at least in legend), Tyrtaeus not only sang; he marched and fought along with his fellow Spartans. Smith hints at this contrast by emphasizing economic transactions. Rather than lifting Britain out of its money-grubbing present to restore to it the virtues of a more noble past (a great theme of the pro-war literature), the Crimean war requires of most people — including the poets — only a contemporary economic sense of heroism. And Smith goes on to comment on another poem published alongside Maud in the 1855 volume ("To the Reverend F. D. Maurice") as a portrait of a nation at war: Tennyson and his friend chat about events in the East while cozily ensconced at home, glass of wine in hand; the martial poet has — like the epic — been domesticated.

In "The Dove of the Dead," William Makepeace Thackeray avoids such accusations of self-serving complacency by directing them toward himself:

I sit beside my peaceful hearth,
With curtains drawn and lamp trimmed bright;
I watch my children's noisy mirth;
I drink in home, and its delight,
I sip my tea, and criticise
The war, from flying rumours caught;
Trace on the map, to curious eyes,
How here they marched, and there they fought.

In intervals of household chat,
I lay down strategic laws;
Why this manoeuvre, and why that;
Shape the event, or show the cause.

Or, in smooth dinner-table phrase,
Twixt soup and fish, discuss the fight;
Give to each chief his blame or praise;
Say who was wrong and who was right.

Meanwhile o'er Alma's bloody plain
The scathe of battle has rolled by —
The wounded writhing and groan — the slain
Lie naked staring to the sky."

The force of that "Meanwhile" is too obvious to belabor. And Louisa Shore, who with her sister Arabella wrote a volume of verses on the war, goes so far as to suggest that perhaps the true poets of this war are the soldiers themselves, who write their deeds in acts rather than words:

The merest soldier is to-day
The poet of his art,
Though he should neither sing nor say
The transports of his heart.
His genius writes in words of steel,
And utters them in thunder —
Indeed, as both these poems suggest, one solution to the problem of sympathy is to write not of events at the front but of the effects of those events on people "[who sit at home and wonder]" – and, contra Goldwin Smith, not all effects were economic. Many poems focus on suffering family members left behind rather than on the deeds of soldiers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, women poets especially favored this approach; recall Hamley’s dual models for the modern war poem: if one were unable to write poems as “sanguinary as the songs of Tyrtaeus,” one might attempt verse as “plaintive as the odes of Sappho.” Several “poetesses” picked up on the available motif of a woman’s waiting for the return of her beloved, for which Tennison’s “Mariana” provided one familiar example. After all, that is what happens in a war: men fight while women wait at home — the story is as old as that of Hector and Andromache.

In some ways the war poems of the women poets seem very conventional. As Tricia Lootens has argued, there was a tradition of female patriotic poetry within which they could work. Lootens traces the tradition back to Felicia Hemans, and she explains that this genealogy has consequences: “through Hemans, Victorian patriotic writing... came to be intimately linked to longings for home.” The idea of home was one that “sought to translate ‘natal’ loyalties into a larger love of country” – and who better than women, who reigned over the domestic sphere, to attempt this often-complex act of translation? But an even surface, what W. M. Rossetti called (in the preface to his edition of Hemans’s poems) “the monotone of mere sex,” frequently hid the complexity of the operation. And today, critics still comment upon the simplicity of these works. Joseph Bristow has contrasted the war poems of Adelaide Anne Procter with Maud, claiming for the former a level headedness against which to view the mood swings of Tennyson’s poem: “Procter’s poetry is written in a consistently direct style,” he remarks. Nevertheless, her very directness can reveal tensions so prevalent in the culture of the time as not to register as unconventional; as Isobel Armstrong has argued (also noting Procter’s “boldly simple directness”), “with women writers, the more conventional the didactic lyric, the more accepting of its conventions the writer is, the more it can be used as a way of looking at conformity from within.” According to Armstrong, Procter “virtually typifies the woman poet’s interests” in mid-century in her ability to write “the poem of the affective moment and its relation to moral convention and religious and cultural constraint.” In Procter’s war poems, the relevant “affective moments” – the moments requiring sympathetic identification with the emotional experiences of others – are located in domestic experience that looks afar to think about home.

Thus “Waiting” (which I addressed in relation to North and South in chapter 2) tells a characteristic tale of female patience in recording a working-class woman’s conversation with a “Lady” as she explains why she dwells at the seashore instead of passing a life of “rest and ease” at the castle: she is waiting for the return of her long-departed sailor-lover. In “Waiting,” the war remains in the background, something to be inferred. But the inference is supported by a later Procter poem, “The Lesson of the War,” in which the nation “waits, and listens / For every Eastern breeze / That bears upon its bloody wings / News from beyond the seas.” As I argued previously, both these poems attest to the prevalent belief at the time that the war promised to forge class unity out of a divided nation. So the “monotone” of monotone it be, comes from the desire to harmonize a set of previously divergent voices; the poems attempt cultural reconciliation akin to the leveling effects of the battlefield. And they achieve this in part through placing readers into a shared “affective” experience of waiting on the home front.

Curiously, only in a third Procter war poem that strays from this model of sympathy to embrace a more abstract, philosophical mode does the act of cultural reconciliation prove difficult. As its very title suggests, “The Two Spirits” wants to differentiate rather than simply to reconcile – or rather, perhaps, it attempts to reconcile through differentiation. In Procter’s lyrical dialogue the Spirit of the Past and the Spirit of the Present, represented by mother-figures, debate the claims of their soldier-sons to glory. The poem touches on many themes of the day, hinting at the contest between pacifism and “just war” theory even as it rehearses a dispute between old and new forms of heroism. The voice of the Past is resolute in the conviction of the value of glory; the voice of the Present is more muted, more sorrowful, more desiring of peace – and also more insistent on the cause being one of right:

**The Spirit of the Past.**

Then, with all valiant precepts
Women’s soft heart was fraught;
“Death, not dishonour,” echoed
The war-cry she had taught;
Fearless and glad, those mothers.
The Crimean War in the British Imagination

At bloody deaths came,
Cried out they bore their children
Only for such a fate!

THE SPIRIT OF THE PRESENT,
Though such stern laws of honour
Arc faded now away,
Yet many a mourning mother,
With nobler grief than they,
Bows down in sad submission:
The heroes of the fight
Learned at her knee the lesson
"For God and for the Right!"

But what is perhaps most curious here is how in voicing the distinction between the bloodiness of the old conception of heroism and the more benign face of the new, both mother-figures accept responsibility for the codes of honor that lead their sons to death. The result is a poem of some anguish; Procter tries to assert a difference between the voices, but the very force of the meter—which remains steady throughout the dialogue (a brief first-person dream-vision frame in a less martial and more thoughtful ambiic pentameter surrounds the body of the poem)—seems to work against her. And while the Spirit of the Present gets the last word, this word proves particularly disturbing: "Though nursed by such old legends"—as originally recounted by the Spirit of the Past, but as told also, the poem makes clear, by the mothers of the present—

Our heroes of to-day,
Go cheerfully to battle
As children go to play.  

The jarring simile reinforces the degree to which those mothers are implicated in their own suffering: it is they who taught their sons to play so. Such women are a part of the culture that has produced the present suffering, for all their ostensible attempt to create a more peaceful, feminized society. Compare Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s "Mother and Poet" (published posthumously in 1862), which relates the wartime death of two sons of a nationalist woman caught up in the battles of the Risorgimento. "I made them indeed / Speak plain the word country. "I taught them, no doubt, / That a country’s a thing men should die for at need." The poems give a new meaning to the link between the idea of a "mother-tongue" and that of the motherland. Procter’s verse uses conventional patriotic terms to question, albeit quietly, conventional beliefs.

"The song that nerves a nation’s heart"

A related conjoining of natal and national bonds occurs in the much more jingoistic war poetry of the sisters Louisa and Arabella Shore, whose War Lyrics appeared in 1855. Once more, most of the poems are written from a home-front perspective. Thus the we in Arabella Shore’s “The British Soldier” indicates a possession of the war experience based on patriotic and familial bonds rather than direct knowledge: “We know our soldier,” the poem begins, “recognise / In him the land whose huts and towers, / Whose social freedom, household ties, / Alone could train such men as ours” (lines 1–4). This poem, too, attempts to reconcile divergent forces: note again the insistence on class union in those "huts and towers."

A comparably coalescing force operates on the soldier’s body, which merges with the land in which he was born, and appears also in the forced union of “freedom” and constraint ("ties") under the overarching aegis of “social” and domestic spheres that seem more similar than separate. In the poem’s second section, the speaker’s claim to an understanding that also bridges gender divides is given biological support, even as it is made clear that the poem’s collective voice is female:

Oh British Soldier! mid thy feats
Of wonder, still show what thou art –
That in thine iron frame yet beats
Thy mother’s and thy sister’s heart. (lines 37–40)

So bonds of blood, soil, and society allow for an imaginative connection between women on the home front and their men at the battlefield.

But while the poems begin on the home front, they do not remain there. Rather, the Shores use their privileged female capacities for sympathy to take their speakers into battle. Arabella Shore’s “The Maiden at Home” represents yet another example of a “Marina”-esque poem of waiting, but here passive waiting shifts into imaginative action. This poem, like Tennyson’s Maud, begins in an animated and echoing English landscape:

Fast, fast I pace the long, green walk,
I wander wide and far;
The woods are full of phantom talk,
And all their speech is war. (lines 1–4)

The Maiden’s wandering mimics physically the much more distant travels of her soldier-lover, as she yearns not only for him but also for the breadth of his experience:

Oft these dull limits to enlarge.
This blank with life to fill!
The Crimean War in the British Imagination

Oh! to have been in that grand charge
Up Alma's deadly hill! (lines 69-72)

And her marching, enhanced by the metrical march of the verse, facilitates a form of identification:

See, step by step, how firm and slow
Those peerless men march on.
Through showers of death unmoved they go,
And the dreadful heights are won!

Love whirls me with an eager pain
Into the battle blast-
Oh! for an angel's wing to gain
And hold my hero fast!

Still must dumb frozen distance prove
The blank 'twixt him and me?
I will be with thee, oh! my love,
Whate'er thy fate may be. (lines 73-84)

That "blank" is partly filled by the words on the page, as the poet uses her art (as much as her love) to bridge the gap between her and her beloved.

But perhaps the most interesting of the war poems—other than Tennyson's—are those by the fellow spasmodics Alexander Smith and Sydney Dobell. Their jointly composed 
*Sonnets on the War* (1855) were followed by Dobell's own collection, *England in Time of War* (1856). As its title suggests, the latter volume is expressly dedicated to recording, through the use of loose dramatic monologue form (the poems are in a first-person non-authorial voice),

home-front experiences of the war. Many of the verses are written in a Scots brogue that brings to mind the cockney, working-class voices of Kipling's soldiers; they reflect the new concern for the ordinary private soldier produced by the Crimean War.

Dobell's ventribiquism, however, is far-ranging; he also takes on female roles, as in the effusion "An Evening Dream," in which a soldier's sister gazes at a view of cornfields while imagining the experiences of her brother at the front:

I love it, soldier brother! at this dim weird hour, for then
The serried ears are swords and spears, and the fields are fields of men.
Ranks, on rank in faultless phalanx stem and still I can discern,
Phalanx after faultless phalanx in dumb armies still and stern. (lines 61-81)

There seems to be something enabling to the male poet in taking on for the moment this "maiden's dream of war" (line 31): it saves him from the peculiar guilt of the male noncombatant poet. And, as for Arabella Shore, the landscape itself proves an aid to overcoming distance. In the middle section of the poem, pastoral and martial merge, as the maiden describes a dawn attack on the British camp (the onset, presumably, of the Battle of Inkerman). As the visions take over, relatively measured fourteeners speed up into a much more uneven verse form, accelerated by increasingly frequent internal rhymes, to accommodate the action of the dream:

A gun! and then a gun! 'tis far and early sun
Dost thou see the yonder tree a fleeting redness rise,
As if, one after one, ten poppies red had blown,
And shed in a blenching of the eyes:
They have started from their rest with a bayonet at each breast,
Those watchers of the west who shall never watch again!
'Tis nought to die, but oh, God's pity on the woe
Of dying hearts that know they die in vain!
Beyond yon backward height that meets their dying sight,
A thousand tents are white, and a slumbering army lies.
"Brown Bess," the sergent cries, as he loads her while he dies.
"Let this devil's deluge teach them, and the good old cause is lost."
He dies upon the word, but his signal gun is heard,
Yon ambush green is stirred, yon labouring leaves are tossed,
And a sudden sabre waves, and like dead from opened graves,
A hundred men stand up to meet a host.
Dumb as death, with bated breath,
Calm upstandt that fearless band,
And the dear old native land, like a dream of sudden sleep,
Passes by each manly eye that is fixed so stern and dry
On the tide of battle rolling up the steep. (lines 61-81)

Those blown red poppies strike the modern reader as omen of the poetry of the First World War. Here, their color functions as an imagistic bridge to the East. The English scene before the maiden's eyes (to which they presumably belong, given that she has been looking at the cornfields in which they often grow) melds with that of the Crimea, so that it becomes hard to know where exactly "yon" leaves of line 74 are being tossed. When, as this section closes, the maiden—in dreaming of the East—imagines her brother's "manly eye" (among others) dreaming of home ("the dear old native land"), the perspectival reversal initiates the disappearance of the English pastoral from the poem: the dreaming girl has been transported into the world of the soldiers.
And the poem closes entirely in that world, with no reference to the maiden or to the dream-vision frame, as we witness the charge through her eyes:

Our host moved on to the war,
Was blown from line to line near and far,
And like the morning sea, our bayonets you might see,
Come beaming, gleaming, streaming,
Streaming, gleaming, beaming,
Beaming, gleaming, streaming, to the war.
Clairon and clairon defying,
Sounding, resounding, replying,
Trumpets braying, piper playing, chargers neighing.
Near and far
The to and fro storm of the never-done hurrahing,
Thro' the bright weather, banner and feather rising and falling, bugle and fife
Calling, recalling — for death or for life —
Our long line moved forward to the war.

For all the shared use of repetition, the poem lacks the beautiful and ennobling restraint of Tennyson's "Charge." But it also tries to achieve an "our" — a collective national identity ("England, England, England, England, England!"") that resonates with the conclusions of both "The Charge" and "Maud." Indeed, "resonates" is an apt word in this context, as the verse attempts to create meaning precisely by allowing sound to resonate — to echo — so that "to and fro," "calling" and "recalling" can meld, even as event (the brother's experience abroad) and memory (the sister's imaginative home-front reenactment) merge. But while the poem performs a feat of sympathetic engagement that is intended to facilitate the creation of a Nation-at-war, a question remains: what role does the breakdown of language, as words follow words through the force of similarity in sound, play in achieving this goal? Why does the poem have to descend from sense to noise in its conclusion?

The poetry of bewilderment: vox populi

We can begin to answer these questions by considering the use of ventriloquism in "Sonnets on the War," the collection that Dobell and Alexander Smith composed together. While the poems I have considered thus far tend to address the issue of sympathy through focus on a single subject, the Sonnets apply a wider lens. They were written separately but published without attribution, and many come in pairs. Collectively, the poems record the war experience by presenting a loose chronological history of the conflict from a range of perspectives. "The Crystal Palace" (symbol of the Pax Britannica) appears early, followed by "Murmurs," to indicate the approach to war. Major battles have sonnets dedicated to them, as do representative participants: "The Army Surgeon," "The Wounded," "Worthy," "A Statesman," and, of course, "Miss Nightingale." But while the sonnets function as a collection, they also exhibit collectivity individually: several poems are collages of snippets of speech, both quoted and indirect, from multiple speakers. In a fine treatment of the poems, Natalie Houston has argued that this methodology acknowledges a diversity of viewpoints on the war; indeed, she invokes the term heteroglossia and suggests that as a collection, the work "stretch[es] poetic language towards the novel." As a result of this tendency, the Sonnets do not display the univocality one generally expects of Victorian war poetry. While the patriotic intent of the authors appears throughout the volume, which was written in part to salvage the poets' reputations from the taint of effeminate spasmotism, the poems nevertheless generate readerly disquietude. The confusion — even bewilderment — stemming from their refractive diversity demonstrates further challenges of interpretation created by the war.

A pair of sonnets entitled "The Wounded" typifies the impact of the collection as a whole:

"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'th 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!" "God curse thee!" "Doctor, stay,
You 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
While sentimentally patriotic, these two poems are also curiously multifaceted. This despite their formal unity as (albeit comparatively irregular) sonnets; it is as though the poets wanted to impose order on confusion through the imposition of form. Nevertheless, the sonnets' proliferating voices register the range of the wounded soldiers' responses: from the desperate attempt to cling on, to the brave willingness to sacrifice self for other, to stoic acceptance, to (most surprisingly) downcast anger ("God curse thee"). They also register the diversity of the soldiers themselves, with regard to age, class, and even nationality, as in the Scots of "my ain / Auld Mother" and the French of the second sonnet. Simultaneously, the poems appeal to different home-front contingents: lovers, mothers, and fathers. They remind us of the expanding web of pain inflicted by the war. Unlike in Proctor's poems, where the war's unifying power generally secures a positive bottom line in the tally of gains against losses attributable to it, voices here refuse to coalesce. One might compare the ecstatic repetition of "An Evening Dream" — "England, England, England, England, England, England, England" — to the less unanimous call of these sonnets: "'Help,' 'heal,' 'help,' 'heal!' 'God curse thee!'" We feel for the doctor who must perform his duties in the midst of this cacophony of individual demands. Yet even as he meditates events on the battlefield for the poems' home-front audience, the sonnets' overall emphasis on sympathy also discourages readers from passing judgment.

Thus the divergence of voices in the sonnets emphasizes not so much debate about the merits of war as the poems' concern for the nature of collective experience itself. Such experience lay at the heart of what became known as "the people's war." As I discussed in chapter 1, David Urquhart commented cynically on this designation, devoting particular scrutiny to the concept of "public opinion" and its relationship with "private judgment." During times of war, the contest between public and private ways of thinking tends to come to the fore, and war poetry serves as a major locus of this confrontation. As Tricia Lootens has argued, even bluntly jingoistic poetry tries "openly to unite developing conceptions of subjective identity, at its most intimate, private, and inescapable, with shifting definitions of the powers and duties of public political subjects." But with access to events of the war rendered possible by the documentary efforts of journalists and artists in the Crimea, the junction between private and public perspectives became unusually fraught. As E. B. Hamley remarked in his review of the war poetry, new technologies allowed for the rapid translation of events into publicly accessible cultural commodities:

we receive with tolerable speed and regularity, commentaries from home upon our doings; and not only does the council of chiefs find its deliberations aided by the ever unerring vox populi, but the Crimean Achilles reads the inspiring stanzas which tell of his own deeds in the last battle, before the blood has rusted on his bayonet; while (alas that it should be so often so!) the British Laodamia hears her war for the lost Protesilaus echoed with bewildering iteration in musical verse."

Note how as a result of the "media culture," Hamley's heroes and heroine (Achilles, Laodamia, Protesilaus) find themselves backed by a chorus: a "vox populi." Like its synonym "public opinion," "vox populi" was a slogan of the day. As a letter to The Times put it in December of 1854, "For the present attitude of this country is... such a vox populi as we are almost entitled to call vox Dei." Natalie Houston has argued how Smith and Dobell's sonnets "transform public events into reproducible yet privately held souvenirs" that "explore the intersection of private emotion and public events." But the poets are also interested in what happens when public emotion intersects with private events — that is to say, in the ways in which a group-mentality can take over in response to war, leaving little room for what Urquhart denominates "private judgment."

"Vox Populi" is in fact the title of one of the more curious poems in Smith and Dobell's collection:

What if the Turk be foul or fair? Is't known
That the sublime Samaritan of old
Withheld his hand till the bruised wrench 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.
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Whether ye wrestled with this Satan o'er
A dead dog, or the very living head
Of Freedom, every precious drop ye blad
Is holy. 'Tis not for his broken door
That the stern goodman shoots the burglar dead. (19)

Here Dobell dispenses with direct dialogue to indicate that the ideas put forth express collective opinions about the war; one is reminded of Browning's strategy in the opening parts of The Ring and the Book (1868–69). Dobell's poem can be divided into sections, each presenting an argument about the merits of the conflict. The first three and a half lines claim (with Biblical precedent) that one should help one's neighbor (i.e., Turkey) regardless of his moral standing; the argument is essentially one of principle. But the second section of two and a half lines gives a prudential reason for war—the opposite type of argument (stop the spread of the Russian Empire before it reaches more obvious British interests). As though recognizing the intellectual confusion created by such contrasting styles of justification, the next six and a half lines avoid the issue altogether by offering a poem to the soldiers, who (everyone can agree) must be honored for their sacrifice, whether the cause be noble or not. Yet as far as the "message" of the poem is concerned, the real question here is how to read the final sentence. Why does the goodman shoot the burglar dead? If not for his broken door—a thing of little worth—it could either be for the principle of the matter (as in lines 1 through 4), or for the valuables that were inside (a prudential argument in the style of lines 4 through 6). So the conflict between modes of argument, which the middle section of the poem intends to dispose of through sympathy with the soldiers, cannot be so easily avoided. In the prudential case, the discovery that you were wvenging over a "dead dog" rather than Freedom renders the shooting (and thus the war) a terrible waste. The effect of this poem is thus not to create a sense of national unity but to create a sense of unsuccessful striving towards such unity.

While the poems on "The Wounded" focus on sympathy, "Vox Populi" is about judgement; was war justified? So when Houson claims that it "takes no stand" on the various positions it presents—that they are merely "set forth as markers of public opinion"—her assessment does not fully acknowledge the poem's bewilderment effect. And although sympathy for the wounded may be accepted as given, "public opinion" itself was a contested idea in the period. To Urquhart, "Public Opinion" is something of a monomaniac, signifying a consensus that is achieved only at the expense of individual thought:

"The song that nerves a nation's heart"

We say "the public interest," "the public debt," how is it that we cannot employ the definite article in this case also, and say "the public opinion." It is that we imply something indefinite; but opinions are many, not indefinite, and opinion taken generally must include the several opinions of which it is the aggregate. The anomaly of the expression is to be found in the incongruity of the process. The opinions are those of parties. There is the opinion of the Whigs, the opinion of the Tories, the opinions of the Radicals, the opinions of the Chartists. Aggregate, indefinite opinion is thus Toryism, plus Whiggery, plus Radicalism, plus Chartism. Then it would take the definite article, but these are not plus but minus each other. The one neutralizes the other, just as by the addition of an alkali to an acid, there remains neither alkali nor acid, but effervescence...

Public opinion, however, is true as a label, signifying the protrusion of the faculties, public and private.45

Urquhart's summation of opinions that add up to nothing ("effervescence") seems not altogether unlike the effect of Dobell's sonnet, which is confusing, to say the least. Even the most careful reader can feel some sympathy with E. B. Hanley's response to Smith and Dobell's collection: "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 track."46 And while the confusion of the poems may be unintentional, it appears as a by-product of their multivocal methodology that is itself a by-product of something important—and new—about the experience of this war in particular.

Journalism has again exerted its influence; as Houston observes, newspapers provide a likely source for the opinions expressed in "Vox Populi" (and many other sonnets in the collection).46 But the role of the press in the war was subject to much debate, as I have argued—not least because of the forms of language it produced. To Carlyle, for example, the war-talk was devoid of poetic potential precisely because it was devoid of meaning: "I am very sad, in thinking of the general matter; a War undertaken to please Able Editors and the windy part of the population...a War carried on amid...the unmelodious rumour of 'Own Correspondents' at every step."47 "Unmelodious" wind and rumor have taken over from sensible discourse. Urquhart uses the potentially poetic idea of "voice" to make a related point; he claims that the editorial "We"—especially that of The Times—has usurped the individual voices of the British people, effectively silencing them: "The Times is no longer an organ of public opinion; it is the organ of England—she sees by it; she hears by it; she speaks by it...other nations know England only by its voice."48 To read the bewildering opinions of "Vox Populi" in the light of such comments is
to see the war as productive not so much of national unity but of national nonsense; recall Hamley’s reference to “bewildering iteration in musical verse.” Vex populi becomes the sign of a working democracy but of a kind of coercion.

“Freedom of mind,” Urquhart insists, “resides in private judgment.” And curiously, “Vox Populi” is preceded in the collection by a poem entitled “Self,” which argues for the primacy of individual experience: “Each man hath his own personal happiness, / Each hath his separate rack of sorrow distress” (18). With the unprecedented media coverage that gave everyone access to events directly affecting most Britons only economically, the Crimean War created a new set of conditions for writing patriotic poetry. Smith and Dobell attempted to negotiate this novel terrain by offering a collection that could simultaneously address collective and individual experiences. Yet for all their efforts, a gap persists between what Lootens identifies as “subjective identity, at its most intimate, private, and inescapable” and “the powers and duties of public political subjects.” And the poetry manifests this gap in its confusions.

The poetry of bewilderment: “The Charge of the Light Brigade”

The particular interpretive demands created by the conditions of the Crimean War appear most clearly, though, in responses to its best-remembered military engagement: the charge of the Light Cavalry Brigade at Balaklava. There, on the morning of October 25, 1854, over 600 British men rode the wrong way down what The Times (and later Tennyson) called a “valley of death,” as enemy guns showered them with “murderous fire, not only in front, but on both sides, above, and even in the rear.” Fewer than 200 returned to the camps that day. No other event of the war proved as difficult — and as tempting — for poets to translate into verse.

Suggestively, the charge was itself the product of confusion, the result of a series of bungled orders. Earlier in the morning, Lord Raglan had ordered the cavalry division’s commander, Lord Lucan, to advance upon some Russians who had stormed the Turkish redoubts above the valley and were now preparing to remove the British cannon they had taken there. But the poorly transcribed order was misunderstood by Lucan: he kept the cavalry at bay. Angered by Lucan’s failure to act, Raglan sent a second order: “Lord Raglan wishes the cavalry to advance rapidly to the front — follow the enemy and try to prevent the enemy from carrying away the guns — Troops Horse Artillery may accompany — French cavalry is on

yr. left — Immediate.” Unfortunately, this message made no sense from Lucan’s perspective; where he stood, he could not see the guns in question. So, according to Russell’s report in The Times, Lucan asked for clarification: “Where are we to advance to?” Here personality got in the way: Captain Nolan, the headstrong cavalry officer who had delivered the message, held Lucan (who had gained the nickname “Lord Look-on” for his supposed cowardice) in contempt. “There are the enemy, and there are the guns, sir, before them; it is your duty to take them.” Russell records Nolan (who died in the charge) as responding, with an accompanying gesture: a pointed finger. But the valley indicated (or at least understood by Lucan to be indicated) was not that which Raglan had initially intended. Lucan nevertheless felt obliged to pass the order on to Lord Cardigan, the commander of the Light Brigade and a despised brother-in-law (the feeling was mutual). And Cardigan, motivated by what Kinglake termed “chivalrous obedience,” but also, no doubt, by his stubborn anger towards Lucan, led his men into the very mouths of the Russian cannon.

Why has this military blunder become a symbol of the war, and what does our memory of it have to do with poetry? The answers to these questions intersect in the fact of Tennyson’s immortal ballad, “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” the source of so much of our cultural memory of the war. But Smith and Dobell’s poems can also speak to the issue. As Russell’s reports make clear — and as several modern critics have noted — the charge has always been considered as an event requiring interpretation. This despite its having been so much the product of witnessing: The Times’s leader records how “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.” These two facts about the charge — its impenetrability and its visibility — coalesce in the barrage of debate it produced. So, for example, The Times begins by announcing the error to have been one of “unusual simplicity”: “There was no surprise, not even too short a notice. There was no misconception of the enemy’s strength . . . This grand military holocaust was an entirely distinct affair.” The language suggests a Cartesian clarity. And yet in the very same paragraph, the leader-writer acknowledges that “How far the order was itself the result of a misconception, or was intended to be executed at discretion, does not appear, and will probably afford the subject of painful but vain regrimination. And, of course, Tennyson’s tag for what the soldiers actually engaged in the charge refused to do — “Their’s not to reason why” (“The Charge."
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(line 14) – placed no such prohibition on the British public. Trudi Tate puts it nicely:

What went wrong? Was Raglan’s order ambiguous, or was it misunderstood? Was the error caused by topography? Precisely who said what and what it meant has never been fully established. And what the exercise itself meant was a matter of dispute, both at the time and since. Were the cavalry heroes, or idiots? Did the advance cause the British cause, or hinder it? Who, if anyone, was to blame? The charge raised questions of knowledge and interpretation that were to trouble both the literature and the politics of the 1870s.17

As The Times demanded, “What is the meaning of a spectacle so strange, so terrific, so disastrous, and yet so grand?18 General Bosquet’s famous comment on the charge, “C’est très magnifique, mais ce n’est pas la guerre,” speaks to the confusion: if not war, what was it?19 Meaning had to be constructed out of something so apparently meaningless. This was an occurrence that required an act of translation to be understood, even as the event itself came about through a misinterpretation: the bungled string of orders.

Appropriately, many visual responses to the event focus on the need for interpretation, for revisiting or reinscribing the incidents of the day in order to come to grips with them. Consider John Leech’s cartoon (discussed in chapters 1 and 4) “Enthusiasm of Paterfamilias, On Reading the Report of the Grand Charge of the British Cavalry on the 25th” (figure 13).20 And Ulrich Keller notes two other pictures on the same theme. In “The Heroes of Balaklava Fighting their Battles Over Again,” a wood-engraving after a drawing by Captain Henry Hope Crealock, a group of officers and ladies have assembled above the valley where the battle took place.21 The officers (the “heroes”) act as tour-guides, pointing out the scene of their glory – the touristic milieu suggesting perhaps an element of satire. An even more curious take on the subject comes in James Sant’s painting, Lord Cardigan Giving an Account of the Charge of the Light Brigade to the Prince Consort and the Royal Children (1855), which Cardigan commissioned to hang in his family’s country house. The work displays an interior grouping at Windsor palace, with a map laid across a stand on the left of the canvas. Cardigan and Albert in its center, and the clearly entranced children assembled around them (the Queen’s absence from the picture is a mystery – she appears to have been present at the actual scene). It offers a private (insofar as it would have been seen only by people of his own circle) self-defense on Cardigan’s part, as his role in the charge had come under fire. As Keller argues, it also suggests a shift in representations of the

war: “Instead of showing us what Cardigan did at Balaklava, Sant lets us know what the general said at Windsor Castle. The secondary event overshadows the primary one.”22 The perspective demonstrates the peculiar interpretive demands of the charge.

But poets also had to come to grips with the confusing events of the 25th. Dobell titled his response “The Cavalry Charge” – the lack of specificity registering the occasion’s impact on the British consciousness (the Heavy Brigade’s successful charge that day received far less attention at the time and has since faded from popular memory):

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. (Sonnets, 31)

Yet instead of clarifying the incident, the poem bewilders further. As Patrick Waddington admits, while “evocative and even touching,” the sonnet is “strangely diffuse in its basic meaning and message.”23

Waddington’s puzzlement stems partly from the reference to the marketplace: “On the mart / Is this ‘to lose’? Actually, discussions of the charge commonly enlist economic metaphors to signal the event’s resistance to standard methods of evaluation. A clear military loss believed simultaneously to be a great symbol of national superiority, the charge inevitably fostered discussion of competing standards. Thus The Times’s leader of the 13th uses confused cost–benefit analysis: “Had there been the smallest use in the movement that has cost us so much,” it wonders, right before referring to how the soldiers “sold their lives as dearly as the manifest odds against them would allow.” “Causeless as the sacrifice was, it was most glorious,” the editorialist concludes. Such paradoxical language (how can we measure such value?) appears also in Alexander Smith’s companion sonnet (“Who would not pay that priceless price to see / The trampling thunder and the blaze of steel —” [Sonnets, 22]) and,
in a less obvious form, in Tennyson’s ballad. Tennyson’s friend Henry Lushington sarcastically quotes from “The Charge of the Light Brigade” in “La Nation Boutiquière” (1855) to indicate the lesson that a nation of shopkeepers should have taken (but in his view, didn’t take) from the cavalry charge—and his friend’s poem (notice that here the reference is not to the charge in particular but to the war in general):

For her noble thousands
Dead and yet to die,
She must have a value,
Or a reason why.

This demand, Lushington implies, is unreasonable because it uses false numerical methods to measure a kind of value beyond enumeration. Houston claims that Dobell’s poem “deliberately acknowledges the fact that the charge was a dreadful loss.” And Dobell was indeed capable of recognizing the comfortlessness of glory in the face of death, as “A Hero’s Grave” (from England In Time of War) shows. In this poem, singled out for praise by George Eliot in her review of the book, he records, in language that movingly negates the kinds of arguments we encounter in responses to the charge, the lament of a father searching for his dead son’s grave:

Thro’ echoing lands that ring with victory,
And answer for the living with the dead,
And give me marble when I ask for bread,
And give me glory when I ask for thee—
It was not glory I nursed on my knee. (lines 40–44)

But placed in the context of other discussions of the charge, Dobell’s sonnet’s italics (“to lose?”) attack the false clarity of economic standards of gain and loss, which fail to account for the intangible added value of “Glory.”

Nevertheless, while one can make sense of the poem’s use of paradoxical economic language, its description of the glorious cavalry obscures rather than illuminates meaning. The final metaphor of the “English dog” who dies in the rescue of the shipwrecked man is both graphic and arresting, but to have the soldiers compared to dogs— even “English” ones—hardly elevates them. Moreover, does the “starved wolf” into which the originally lion-like dog is transformed allude critically to the condition of the British soldiers in the Crimea following the long hard winter of 1854–55, as well as to the shrunken numbers emerging from the “Valley of Death” during the charge? And consider Dobell’s use of the phrase “common Britons”: as everyone knew, and as most other poems on the charge make clear, the Light Brigade was unusual in part for being a remarkably aristocratic force. The Times emphasized that the glory of the charge was the greater for involving not “soldiers of fortune” but soldiers with fortunes: “They were men who risked on that day all the enjoyments that rank, wealth, good social position, and fortunate circumstances can offer to those who are content to stay at home.” Is Dobell, as Houston argues, using deliberate irony here to expose the aristocratic military code on which the nationalist sentiment surrounding the charge is based?

Collectively, though, rather than present a coherent ideological perspective, these questions highlight a broader quality to the poem: the way it seems to embrace a confusion that becomes its own ideology. To put the matter so is to note how much the bewilderment generated by Dobell’s sonnet on the charge resembles the kind of perplexity that arises in regard to other sonnets in the collection. For example, once again (although in a less obvious manner than in the multi-voiced “Vox Populi”) a puzzle arises from the poem’s uncertain point of view. The sonnet offers us not only a narrator but also a Traveller. Yet is the Traveller (“who’s e’er thou art”) also the Stranger, or is the narrator imagining him to be addressing a stranger? And who is speaking starting in line 6 of the poem, the Traveller or the narrator (there are no quotation marks)? Moreover, is the Traveller British or foreign (Houston calls him foreign, but to make sense of “our common Britons” it helps to assume the former)? Either way, he is asked to tell his tale of British honor—encapsulated in a poem written for a British audience— to foreigners; the demand suggests a national identity produced from a shared defensiveness.

Curiously, Dobell’s addressee evokes Shelley’s “traveller from an antique land” in “Ozymandias.” For both poets, the traveler figure works to increase the distance between the poet and the subject of the poem, so underscoring what could be called the “Russian doll” structure of the sonnets. The odd perspective on events reminds readers of Dobell’s poem of his distance from the participants in the charge. In fact, because of the geography of the site of the charge, almost all reports register awareness of what it means to witness an event from a distance—a crucial aspect, as we have seen, of the armchair poetry of the war. But included in this awareness is a muted sense of the danger of taking pleasure in the theatricality of it all—a recognition of a failure of sympathy with what the cavalry endured. Thus Dobell’s “Traveller” also threatens to turn into a tourist, like one of Clough’s tourists in Amours de Voyage (composed
1849), who watch the French siege of Rome from atop the Pincian Hill, as though war were one more sight to take in on the Grand Tour:

   So we stand in the sun, but afraid of a probable shower;  
   So we stand and stare, and see, to the left of St. Peter's,  
   Smoke, from the cannon, white. . . .

Recall Bosquet's aesthetic response—“C'est magnifique; The Times referred to the charge of the Light Brigade as a “terrible death-parade.”” Russell described how “Lord Raglan, all his staff and escort, and groups of officers, the Zouaves, French generals and officers, and bodies of French infantry on the height, were spectators of the scene as though they were looking on the stage from the boxes of a theatre.” He doesn't mention the tourists (known as TGs, for “Travelling Gentlemen”), but they were there, too.

But while a theatrical analogy (prevailing in almost all accounts of the engagement, even more modern ones?) might taint Dobell's various narrators, it could also suggest that the cavalry's charge was an act rather than genuine “heroic action.” The threat of the inauthenticity was perhaps especially dangerous given the identification of the army with dandyism. Indeed, the notoriously vain Lord Cardigan saw his first—and only—real action in the charge: he spent much of the war enconced in his private yacht (perhaps appropriately, he has given his name to an article of dress). The Earl of Ellesmere's distinctly aristocratic take on the charge makes use of this tension by drawing upon its audience's preconceptions about the cavalry:

   They said we were heroes best fitted to shine  
   In the barrack and ball-room, the ring and parade,  
   It was hopeless. All knew it; but onward they bounded  
   With the order and speed of some festival day;  
   When with kings to behold them, by gazers surrounded  
   They have mimicked the semblance of battle's array.

Dobell's sonnet plays down the pageantry of the event. But he substitutes a different form of nervousness about witnessing (or should we say not witnessing, given Dobell's distance from the events described?): the almost ancient-mariner-like moral compulsion to retell to which it can give birth.

In fact the echo of Shelley's poem also brings to the fore the concerns of memorializing shared by both sonnets. Critics had been calling on poets to commemorate the charge, and what better form than the sonnet, which since Shakespeare's time ("Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme") had been associated with memorial, to perform this task? But "Ozymandias" calls into question the ability of both monuments and empires to resist the passage of history; the allusion hardly presages well, either for the "temple" of Dobell's final line (the poem before us) or for the British effort in the Crimea. And in general, when the idea of the memorial comes up in the Sonnets, it is subjected to considerable authorial nervousness. In "Rest," the poet begins by announcing "A victory!" but continues in a rather different vein:

   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.  
   Our many-noised metropolis shall pass,  
   And Silence shall grow over it like grass.  

Once more, the ghost of "Ozymandias" seems to hover over the page, and once more, war-song descends into "rav[ing]." The threat of effaced inscription attests to the occasional nature of the poetry, its journalistic impulse. Gerald Massey actually prefaced his collection of poems on the war, War Waits (1885), with a disclaimer: "These rough-and-ready war-rhymes can scarcely be looked upon as poetic fruit maturely ripened, but rather as windfalls, shot down in this wild blast of war. I hasten to present them while they may yet be seasonable, lest they should not keep." But Dobell's verse offers thanks for future forgetfulness, as though recognizing the dangers to national pride in lingering over memories of this war.

And yet we do remember the charge—if not through Dobell's sonnet, then through Tennyson's ballad. And this is at least in part, I would argue, because for all that it seems so different—as The Times put it, "It is difficult not to regard such a disaster in a light of its own, and to separate it from the general sequence of affairs"—the charge of the Light Brigade can stand in for a more general phenomenon about the war. Thomas Carlyle appears to recognize this fact in arguing for the cultural force of Balaklava in a letter to Massey (acknowledging the receipt of his volume of poems):

   To my mind [words missing] fountain of them all is (little as we yet suspect it) precisely excess of "saying" and talking and palaver—what the English Nation, for a great while past, has grown to consider as the chief function of man, and the substitute for silent hard work in all kinds. I believe the cure of
Balaklava, — and of the Universal "Balaklava," which that small Crimean one is but a symbol of, — lies far beyond the dominion of Speech at any rate, my sad ominous thoughts upon it are better to be kept silent than spoken, if they were even speakable.\cite{18}

The sound-connection between "palaver" and "Balaklava" reinforces (or perhaps helps create) Carlyle's sense that while the events of the charge are usually seen to embody a certain conception of heroic action, its impact and resonance owe as much to its relationship to speech, to an excess of speech that stands in the way of "silent hard work." (He may have been thinking in part of the "blundered" string of orders that lay behind the fatal charge.) Here again we see the claim that Balaklava registers so forcefully because it instantiates a truth about the Crimean experience more generally (rather than an exception to it), and that, furthermore, the Crimean experience is but a "small" version of something even more general, if not a "Universal "Balaklava,"" an "English" one. But since the disease seems to be linked to speech, the cure cannot come from speech, Carlyle maintains. Or at least not from ordinary speech — or ordinary poetry; the letter is a peculiar one to write to a friend who has sent you his latest book of verses.

Still, Carlyle's claim accords well with the sense one gets from reading Smith and Dobell's volume that — while they were not exactly trying to effect a cure — in their bewildering impact, the Sonnets represent a descriptive, even paradigmatic, response to the poetic challenges brought on by the Crimean War. These poets were attempting to create forms that would do justice to a variety of experience — both in the Crimea and on the home front — for which they could find no precedent. They were trying to give voice to what Carlyle alludes to as unspeakable not only because it did not fit in with patriotic proprieties ("better to be kept silent"), but because the language to articulate it did not exist ("far beyond the dominion of Speech"). This unspeakable, I shall argue in the second half of this chapter, finds its truest expression in Tennyson's war poems.

**II GIVING VOICE TO THE WAR: TENNYSON'S "CHARGE" AND MAUD'S BATTLE-SONG**

Like Smith and Dobell, Tennyson appears to have felt the need to "do" this war "in different voices": while "The Charge of the Light Brigade" deals impersonally but respectfully with a collective action, an epic deed, in six rapid stanzas, *Maud* wallows spasmodically in an individual's suffering. Perhaps these formal distinctions explain why the poems are so rarely discussed together (as opposed to individually or serially), in spite of the fact that "The Charge" was written even as Tennyson was working on *Maud*.*\cite{196} An intimate link between the poems does appear, though, in the crucial place of a martial ballad in the narrative of *Maud*. When the speaker first encounters Maud, she is "Singing of Death, and of Honour that cannot die" (1.177):

> She is singing an air that is known to me,
> A passionate ballad gallant and gay,
> A martial song like a trumpet's call
> Singing alone in the morning of life,
> In the happy morning of life and of May,
> Singing of men that in battle array,
> Ready in heart and ready in hand,
> March with banner and bugle and file
> To the death, for their native land. (1.164–72)

Although this "chivalrous battle-song" (1.183) remains unrecorded — "far beyond the dominion of Speech," in Carlyle's terms — it manages to reverberate throughout the pages of the poem that bears its singer's name.

Many critics have been tempted to read Maud's ballad in contrast with the larger work into which it is (albeit silently) embedded. Thus Herbert Tucker has argued that it is "traditional," belonging to an "aristocratic past" at odds with the dismal present of *Maud*.\cite{20} Similarly, Tricia Lootens claims that "What sings itself, through [Maud], is the combined folk and chivalric tradition from which the future author of the *Idylls of the King* (1859–85) was to draw his most ambitious attempts to link England's idealized past to its future."\cite{21} Yet the aristocratic nostalgia invoked might belong as much to the poet's current works as to his future ones: it may be that commonly attributed to Tennyson's "Charge," a poem to which he himself referred repeatedly as a "ballad"\cite{22} and which, according to Jerome McGann, also represents an attempt to reinscribe the "historically threatened" aristocracy.\cite{23} After all, both *honour* and *death* figure prominently there, too. "Honour" takes over the imperative form in the final stanza of the poem from the otherwise controlling "Charge" of the title, seeming almost to be similarly reified — converted from verb into noun — in the process of being written into the meter (lines 33, 34). And the other end towards which the ballad charges irrevocably is *death* — as in both "valley of" (lines 3, 16) and "jaws of" (lines 24, 46).

In what follows, I shall consider what it means to imagine *Maud's* battle-song as an air known to the poet as well as to his speaker: as
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Tennyson's own "Charge." Why did Tennyson feel the need to silence Maud — in essence, to erase from the longer poem his own recently published ballad? Can we perhaps think of this silence as a presence, as a third "voice" of response to the war? I will begin by looking at how Tennyson's two poems struggle formally to shape history. Then I turn more directly to the verse to see what it might mean imaginatively to embed "The Charge" into Maud. Only by considering these poems together can we come to understand the poetic challenge brought about by the Crimean War.

Composing history

At the heart of this challenge lie Tennyson's feelings about the war, feelings that shaped the forms of both his Crimean War poems. Critics of the verses have been fixated by the question of the poet's warmongering. The issue appeared early in reaction to Maud, partly because by the time that poem was published (on July 28, 1855), a not-insignificant portion of the public had become disenfranchised with the war. Gladstone's initial dislike of Maud for its "war-spirit" was symptomatic of the public mood. Goldwin Smith voiced the objection succinctly in the Saturday Review. "To the glorification of war as a remedy for the canker of peace, the common sense of the nation, even of the most warlike part of it, has answered, that war, though to be faced, and even to be accepted with enthusiasm, for other ends, is not to be incurred for this."

I say the question of Tennyson's warmongering because, as many critics have also pointed out, the poem's formal structure prevents us from equating the speaker's opinion — that "the blood-red blossom of war with a heart of fire" (111-53) would purge Britain of the "canker of peace" (315-50 [1855]) — with that of Tennyson. While Tennyson affixed the subtitle A Monodrama to Maud only in 1875, the dramatic elements of what he also spoke of as his "little Hammer" were both intended and recognized from the first. R. J. Mann based his defense of the work on this fact; after quoting from a string of accusatory reviews, in which the speaker's failings are attributed to his poet, he insists that "Maud is a drama." Thus the speaker should be considered as tragically flawed, not as a paragon to be held up for imitation. While there is some disagreement, most critics today use the term "dramatic monologue" (a label used synonymously with monodrama in the period) to describe Maud, a designation that allows us to discuss the ways in which the poem's speaker can be responded to with judgement as well as with the sympathy that seems to be demanded by the lyric confessional-first-person mode. This was essentially Tennyson's own take on his work (at least after he had been barraged with accusations of warmongering), as comments made in a letter to Archer Gurney in December of 1855 indicate: "Strictly speaking I do not see how from the poem I could be pronounced with certainty either peace man or war man . . . The whole was intended to be a new form of dramatic composition." While Tennyson may have been using the dramatic argument ex post facto, to defend himself from attacks he had not anticipated in writing the poem, Maud nevertheless exhibits a degree of ambivalence about its hero that renders it appropriate, as we shall see.

But if Tennyson's use of the dramatic monologue destabilizes his position with regard to the war in Maud, "The Charge of the Light Brigade" seems on its surface (indeed, by means of its extraordinarily polished surface) to avoid such ambiguities. It is this quality that has led it to be called "probably the last great battle-piece that could be written in English" — the last great poem, that is, to avoid the ironic awareness that would subsequently plague patriotic writing. "The Charge" gives the impression of upholding the pro-war aristocratic and military code entrenched in the chivalric mode upon which Tennyson is drawing (after all, these are cavaliers he is writing about). McGann's reading suggests how it can be considered as an "attempt to show not merely that the English aristocracy has not lost its leadership qualities, but in what respect this historically threatened class still exercises its leadership." The response exacted by "The Charge" thus appears much simpler than that which Maud demands. The judgement required of the reader of the ballad — so much a matter of contention in Maud — seems dictated by the repeated imperative of the final lines:

Honour the charge they made!
Honour the Light Brigade,
Noble six hundred! (lines 53-55)

If the imperative tells us what to think of the action, the long-delayed epithet noble — the only adjective (other than the titular "Light") applied to the Brigade itself in the whole poem — ensures that we know what to make of the actors. Moreover, if the ballad's final lines dictate judgement, the verses also dismiss any effort at sympathy (the other axis of response to the dramatic monologue) in favor of remote awe — a lack of comprehension for the other, rather than an attempt at comprehension through identification.
This sense of inaccessibility resulted from a deliberate effort on Tennyson's part to avoid accusations of armchair commentary that had plagued the Crimean War poets. In their detailed account of the "creation" of the poem, Edgar Shannon and Christopher Ricks explain how earlier drafts included a witnessing "we" ("We saw their sabres bare / Flash all at once in air") that was removed when the poet realized that it "imperilled" the carefully achieved "respectful distance of the acknowledged non-combatant." Tennyson, who was always acutely aware of the issue of audience, seems to have solved some of the problems he initially faced with writing "The Charge" after deciding that his readership for it was to be the soldiers themselves (with whom the newspaper version had become a great favorite); still, "The Charge" talks to the soldiers only by refusing to claim any understanding of them — they being the poem's dominant pronoun — that is, it talks to rather than talks with.

This distanced perspective creates an astoundingly enclosed piece of poetry — less "well wrought urn" than well wrought sphere — making it a rich mine for formal close reading. Shannon and Ricks have argued convincingly the appropriateness, the significance, of every choice in diction, syntax, and structure made by Tennyson, each question mark and exclamation point, each pronoun, every repetition, and every image. Nevertheless (while they disagree as to the poem's politics) both McGann and Trudi Tate have described how such aesthetic perfection belies the rather messy historical truth that lay behind the work: its occasional nature. Tate in particular shows that the ballad's apparent univocalism masks a much more complicated response to the war. She points out that for all Tennyson's attempts to enclose meaning in the poem, its very subject refuses codified meaning, as I have described. Thus when Tennyson re-voices a wondering world in the final stanza of the poem, right before the injunction to honor and the designation of nobility attempt to bring to a halt the gallop of the verses and fix their significance, the meaning of wonder comes across as lingeringly ambiguous — not just indicating awe, but also suggesting a perplexed and questioning stance. As Tate remarks,

"The song that nerves a nation's heart"

In fact, an unintended consequence of all of those repetitions that Shannon and Ricks bring to our attention is the sense that we get when reading the poem, why stop here?

And the poem's genesis is correspondingly troubled. As has often been noted, it was written in response to The Times's reports of the charge, discussed above. But the part of the newspaper editorial that served as its real "germ" is the phrase "some hideous blunder," which provided the dactylic meter for the ballad. The centrality of the concept of blunder to Tennyson's poem would seem to undermine the straightforward patriotism often attributed to it. When Thomas Hughes asked Charles Kingsley to write a ballad on the war, Kingsley answered that he could not bring himself "to make fiddle rhyme with diddle about it" — or blundered with hundred, like Alfred Tennyson. Poetry about this war (note that Balaklava again symbolizes the war more broadly) appeared almost inevitably to devolve into doggerel once the concept of "blunder" had entered the picture.

Curiously, the idea of blundering also emerges twice in the correspondence between Tennyson and John Forster (friend and editor of the Examiner, in which the ballad was first published on December 9), during a discussion about corrections to the proofs of the poem. On the 8th, Tennyson wrote to Forster: "On receiving the printed ballad I wished that my order (my last) had been 'blundered' and that the first edition had stood — never mind — I have corrected." Forster responded the next day in the same vein:

That you may see how determined I was to carry out your order without a blunder — though I may say I disapproved of its suggestions, which, if you had persisted in them, I would not have said — I enclose you the proof which was before me this morning when your letter arrived.

But by a sharp effort there was time to try back again — and here you see it is done. I am particularly glad that Mrs. Tennyson thinks with you, with all of us, the original version the best.

At first glance, such light punning about the mistaken orders and stoic obedience brought out during the charge (here rendered unnecessary by a timely revocation of the order) seems almost shockingly irreverent. But the easy translation of the terms into the debate about the composition of the poem suggests how issues brought to the fore by the charge could be understood in literary terms.

It also intimates how Tennyson's attempt to control the meaning of his poem can be seen in part as an attempt to control the significance of
the war to compose is to create order out of chaos, and this was what Tennyson was trying to do through the many changes and corrections made to the ballad— including a deletion in the version of the ballad published along with Maud in 1855 of the eight lines acknowledging that "Some one had blundered." And notably, while Tennyson was generally keen on revision, the Crimean War poems were both subjected to an unusual amount of editorial work, both pre- and post-publication. If this fact reflects Tennyson's efforts to negotiate his way through the messy politics of the period, it simultaneously suggests problems he might have had in coming to terms with his own feelings and opinions about the war— revision representing a continued effort to refine and fix meaning. So if Tennyson was able to stabilize "The Charge" only after deciding on an audience of the soldiers, the revisions to Maud were made in reaction to an increased awareness of the feelings of his audience brought about by the reviews that Tennyson read and to which he referred obsessively. These changes also mark an effort at clarification—and often at toning down the perception of warmongering, in part by emphasizing that the poem's speaker could not be equated with its poet.

But as the disagreements about the politics of both poems suggest, stabilizing the texts failed to fix their meanings. Indeed, critics tend to argue for a stability and self-consciousness to Tennyson's views about the war that misses what I take to be their defining characteristic: an ambivalence that (as in Smith and Dobell's work) registers not as the fixed double-awareness of irony but as a kind of bewilderment. In what follows, I want to look at a few of the ways in which this bewilderment creates areas of thematic overlap—despite their formal difference—between Tennyson's poems. By imagining what it might mean to insert "The Charge" into the narrative of Maud in place of Maud's unrecorded battle-song, we can recognize the presence of a set of overlapping concerns: a common confusion as to the relationship between public and private selves, a fascination with suicide, and the expression of a hermeneutics of uncertainty. Finally, I will argue that these themes point to a poet trying to find ways in which he can express the unspeakable.

"The song that nerves a nation's heart"

Like other war poems, Tennyson's Crimean verses attempt a complex negotiation between the demands of society and the individual. But the two poems come at the problem from opposite perspectives. With a long history of ceremonial recital (including, as Tate notes, during World War I, when it experienced a resurgence in popularity), "The Charge" is part of the public sphere. And the ballad both had its genesis and was first issued in the most public of Victorian media, the newspaper. Curiously, though, some concern about its appropriateness—perhaps because of the centrality of blunder in the poem—can be registered from its appearance there under the poet's initials, "A. T." The fact that a poem so seemingly public, so much what one might expect of a Poet Laureate in his official capacity (Shannon and Ricks make frequent comparisons to Tennyson's "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington," his first work as the nation's poet), was published with some (albeit meager) attempt at privacy suggests both that this war could not call forth the usual patriotic effusions and that the ballad somehow expressed thoughts that Tennyson considered to be private.

In contrast to "The Charge," Maud feels like a very private poem. The lyric confessional "I" seems an effort towards not only readerly but also authorial sympathy very different from the distanced "they" of the ballad. Moreover (as Ralph Wilson Rader was the first to set out in detail), Tennyson's monodrama revisits crucial periods of the poet's own life, including intimate aspects of his early love affairs and the family history of mental instability that contributed to his father's death. In the Edinburgh Review, Coventry Patmore indicated his sense that Maud was not the public work of a Laureate, calling on the poet to "do the duty which England has long expected of him, and to give us a great poem on a great subject." Nevertheless, Maud was published with full credentials, "by Alfred Tennyson, D. C. L., Poet Laureate."

But at Maud's center is a claim about the indivisibility of public and private, society and the individual. Herbert Tucker has explored this aspect of the poem most forcefully, and he finds a formal source for the relationship: "[Maud] repeatedly represents its solitary central consciousness as instinct with a largely unacknowledged social content. The highly individualistic generic form of monodrama . . . carries [Tennyson's] indictment into the very stronghold of individualism, planting conspicuous social codes within the supposed confessional sincerity of the lyrically speaking, lyrically overheard self." The intersection of public and private is perhaps less surprising if one considers the poem as a dramatic monologue, a form that, as Isobel Armstrong notes, "dramatises the hermeneutic problems in interpretation and communication" and thus "always opens up into cultural problems." Contemporary critics who thought of the poem dramatically also picked up on its propensity for blurring the lines between self and society; George Brimley emphasized
how the speaker’s “character” connected to the culture out of which it arose, “being related dynamically to the society of the time which serves as the back-ground of the picture”14. And Tennyson himself voiced a similar link: “I took a man constitutionally diseased and dip him into the circumstances of the time.”15

Or as Armstrong puts it, “the war hysteria of Maud is a condition of disease” – by which she means both of the man and of the circumstances.16 And in fact, the interpenetration of self and society manifests itself primarily in the disease of madness (at one stage, Tennyson wanted to subtitle Maud “The Madness”); Tucker calls the ostensibly private condition of insanity “the poem’s most comprehensively public gesture.”17 “I have felt with my native land, I am one with my kind” (11.88), the speaker claims in the conclusion of the poem, thus translating the personal hysteria of madness into the broader cultural hysteria of war fever (like it, experienced somatically: “I have felt”) and relinquishing the seemingly solipsistic “I” with which Maud opens for the collective “We” of the final verse (pronouns are every bit as important here as they are in “The Charge”). As a result of the rule of madness over the poem, Maud is peculiarly saturated in its language. As many critics have pointed out, images refuse to stay fixed within the discourse in which the speaker tries to contain them. So, to cite but one example, the floral imagery of Maud merges with the martial: the apparently innocent red roses of Maud’s garden dissolve into the speaker’s heart (which he imagines “blossom[ing] in purple and red” as Maud walks over his grave [1.923]), and finally coalesce into the “blood-red blossom of war with a heart of fire” in the poem’s rabid conclusion (11.53).

But for all its apparent control, “The Charge of the Light Brigade” can also be considered as an essay in madness. Indeed one can view the right shaping of the ballad as a gesture against insanity, an attempt to rein in forces beyond one’s control – almost as examples of asylum outsider art (to think of a visual analogue to some of the poem’s effects) tend to enclose and organize images in repeated patterns that escape such management in spite of their artists’ efforts. Tennyson recalled the general war fervor in “The Charge of the Heavy Brigade” (1883): “O mad for the charge and the battle were we” (line 41). The dual meaning of “mad” – zealously eager and insane – suggests his fundamental ambivalence as to the cultural value of the conflict.

While madness serves as the poems’ chief metaphor through which to explore the interpenetration of self and society, within the framework of both works, the disease manifests itself primarily as an omnipresent suicidal urge. The impulse can seem private, as in the opening passages of Maud in which the speaker contemplates the location of his father’s death even as he fears reenacting it:

I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood,
Its lips in the field above are dabbled with blood-red heat,
The red-ribbed ledges drip with a silent horror of blood,
And Echo there, whatever it asks her, answers “Death.”

For there in the ghastly pit long since a body was found,
His who had given me life – O father! O God! was it well?
Mangled, and flattened, and crushed, and dinted into the ground:
There yet lies the rock that fell with him when he fell. (1.8)

On the one hand, we are in the world of individual nightmare here, in a place of sexualized and violent personal memory. But the geography can also be thought of as a grotesque reinterpretation of the stark valley of “The Charge,” another hollow in which “death” echoes as the answer to every question posed. Like the witnesses standing on the Heights above the cavalry at Balaklava, the speaker here stands above the scene of horror and can only wonder: “who knows?” (1.9). This perspicacious conjunction (and the shared dactylic impulse, both epically and elegiacally inflected) suggests that the two poems are attempting, at least in part, to come to grips with a single phenomenon. For indeed the more licensed public and collective act of (especially non-conscripted) soldiers going to war can be considered suicidal. This fact has led many to argue that the speaker of Maud does not overcome his suicidal urges at the end of the poem but has merely managed to translate them into a more socially sanctioned form – just as the “blood-red heat” of the opening lines (which the poet regarded as proof of his speaker’s madness18) transmutes into the (surely, equally implicating) “blood-red blossom of war” of its penultimate stanza. When the speaker declares himself “at war with myself and a wretched race” (1.364), he is registering the intersection of the private theme of suicide with the more public concerns of the poem – and he is registering the role war plays in the overlap. In this context, the “mangled” corpse of the speaker’s father calls to mind the many descriptions of corpses strewn across battlefields in the war literature of the period.19 He is, after all, a victim of the “Civil war” (1.27) described in the opening sections of Maud.

Yet if all war represents a kind of suicide, the charge epitomized the connection. Recall how The Times’s leader described it as “splendid
self-sacrifice”; Russell wrote somewhat more critically of men “rushing
into the arms of death.” Tennyson acknowledges the suicidal
impulse in the almost casual exchange of one conjunction for another in
his ballad:

Their’s not to reason why,
Their’s but to do and die:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred. (lines 14-17)

“Do and die,” not do or die. Shannon and Ricks call this line “one of
Tennyson’s greatest evocations of duty” – the “utterless” thought (like
Maud’s unvoiced ballad) that is the soul of the poem. Surely, though, to
“do or die” should be enough. The more common version of the phrase
appears in Tennyson’s friend Franklin Lushington’s poem describing the
heroic efforts at the Alma: “Fifty thousand men rise up to do or die.” But
the substitution of conjunctions marks the difference between bravery
and suicide, between “ordinary” battles, such as the Alma, and the
extraordinary charge at Balaklava, between what people had thought
the Crimean War would represent and what it came to represent. Thus when
Emily inadvertently replaced the and with an or in one version of the
manuscript, Tennyson immediately corrected the mistake.31

In Tennyson’s version of the phrase, the soldier faces not a choice or
chance between heroic action and martyrdom but an inevitable conflation
of the two. An act that simultaneously expresses the desire to forgo action
altogether, the suicidal deed can only very rarely (and with difficulty) be
described as epic. Yet the charge of the Light Brigade presented just such a
rare occasion, when suicide and what Matthew Arnold had recently called
“great human action” coincided. Christopher Ricks sees Tennyson as
envious of the “assured simplicity” of the soldier’s response in “The
Charge” largely because of the personal attraction to him of the idea of
honorable suicide.32 In a sense, then, this war, with its nationally regis-
tered miseries and confusions, allowed Tennyson a way to express publicly
his most private desires and terrors by translating them into broadly
acceptable patriotic terms. But if nothing else, Maud’s thorough explo-
ration of the similarity between dishonorable and honorable suicide dem-
strates how keenly alive he was to the ambiguities presented by even so
apparently clear-cut an example of heroism as the charge.

Nevertheless, the charge contributed to changing perceptions of the
heroic. In The Heroes, or Greek Fairy Tales for my Children (1856), Charles
Kingsley remarked how “heroes

was the name which the Hellens gave to men who were brave and skilful, and
dare do more than other men . . . [A]fter a time it came to mean . . . men who
helped their countries . . . And we call such a man a hero in English to this day,
and call it a ‘heroic’ thing to suffer pain and grief.”

Suffering has taken over from action as the core quality of heroism. And
in “Extracts from a Peace Dictionary,” an ongoing satirical commentary
in Punch on the abuses of language to which war had led, “hero” was
defined as “A Fool who dies for his country, when he could stop at home
perfectly safe.”323 Recall The Times’s leader describing the Light Brigade’s
“fortunate circumstances,” had they been “content to stay at home.”
Indeed the charge – a failure by any normal military standards – came
to represent this new, ambiguous (and peculiarly British) form of success.
Russell, in his report of the 14th, claimed of the cavalry that “demi-gods
could not have done what we had failed to do.” While on the one hand,
his wanted to defend the failure to take the guns, his words also contain
the suggestion that the failed action of the Brigade was more glorious than
the successful actions of “demi-gods” would have been. As Tricia Lootens
has contended, citing Ruskin, “the idealized Victorian soldier’s ‘trade’ was . . . ‘not slaying, but being slain.’” Ruskin posited in “The Roots of
Honour” that this willingness for “self-sacrifice” (the phrase repeatedly
invoked in discussions of the charge) was the essential distinction between
the soldier and the merchant, and thus the source of the respect he was
justly accorded.”32 Note how once again these comments imply how the
charge was understood as having escaped the seemingly all-embracing
social cash-nexus. Appropriately, Ruskin also strongly supported Tenny-
son’s reinstatement of the “blundered” line into the ballad.32 The British
sense of a heroic that is as closely linked to failure as to success has
survived: they remain notoriously “good losers.” It is, perhaps, a particu-
larly important “value” for a nation of shopkeepers to uphold.

The quest for failure is also the subject of a poem that serves as a bridge
between the chivalric austerities of “The Charge” and the grotesque self-
revelations of Maud: Robert Browning’s “Childe Roland to the Dark
Tower Came” (published, like Maud, in 1855). Isabel Armstrong notes
that “Childe Roland” is unusual for Browning: “reaching back to the
chivalric world which Tennyson had already laid claim to, it is a symbolic
and existential poem of a kind Browning rarely wrote”; Linda Hughes has
called Browning’s poem a “Tennysonian” manifestation of the dramatic
monologue. At its heart is a suicidal journey not unlike the charge
of the Light Brigade: thinking of those who had tried and failed before
him to reach the Tower, Roland admits that “just to fail as they, seemed
hero, who constantly expresses his uncertainty about the truth of his perceptions and others' claims. His core suspicions and hopes concern Maud's truthfulness: "Yet if she were not a cheat, If Maud were all that she seemed" (1.280-81). And both poems conclude by offering certitude. Even as Childe Roland ends with a claim of knowledge ("I saw them and I knew them all" [line 202]), Tennyson's speaker learns to shift his accusations from Maud and her family to the Czar, the "giant liar" (11.45) who becomes the receptacle for any lingering doubts, allowing him finally to "embrace" his jingoistic convictions (11.59). Still, for all their apparent resolution, the poems leave readers with a sense of uncertainty that is linked to their peculiarly grotesque reinterpretations of chivalric quest narrative. Ruskin's third category of the Grotesque in Modern Painters, Volume III (1866) suggests a form of bewilderment not unlike what I am ascribing to Tennyson's Crimean War poetry: "C). Art arising from the confusion of the imagination by the presence of truths which it cannot wholly grasp." Browning's poem thus helps us to see the grotesque underpinnings not only of Maud but also—less obviously—of The Charge.

The tonal overlap between the poems leads me to wonder whether we are witnessing something new in how poets were using the chivalric during the period of the war. Chris R. Vanden Bossche has argued in reference to Maud that "the modern psyche results from the dissolution of the chivalric social order; for the subject as social entity, the modern world substitutes the isolated, solipsistic individual." The "return to chivalry" thus indicates an attempt to return to "communitarian values," or to provide "a point of vantage from which to criticize" modern individualistic commercial values. But as Childe Roland makes clear— even if Maud leaves it in some doubt—in poetry of the period chivalric motifs can be used precisely to indicate the existence of the "isolated solipsistic individual." What we have in such instances is not so much a nostalgic use of the chivalric as a modern, grotesque reinterpretation of it. And for all its nostalgic invocation of chivalry, where Maud feels most modern is where it also seems most grotesquely, almost existentially, suicidal, as in the closing passages of the poem.

What could be called the chivalric-grotesque arises in other verse of the period, too, such as William Morris's The Defence of Guinevere and Other Poems (1888). Armstrong sees these poems as embodying a "traumatic understanding" of the Crimean War through a "grotesque fascination with violence [that] refuses to match the complexities from which it emerges. Violence is the Grotesque's oversimplification of the complexities
to which the numbed consciousness cannot respond.\textsuperscript{357} Christopher Ricks has suggested that “Tennyson liked the idea of battles because they seemed simple, not difficult”;\textsuperscript{358} again, violence may offer an escape from the confusions of modern life. Yet as Walter Bagehot argued in a review of \textit{Idylls of the King}, while claims of simplicity may have been true for the battles of the past, they no longer held for modern ones. These, as often as not, devolved into versions of the battle of Epipolae, where (in Arnold’s famous words) “ignorant armies clash by night.” Hence, Bagehot concluded, “the events of the chivalric legend are better adapted” to poetry than more recent wars, because they “present human actions in a more intelligible shape.”\textsuperscript{39} Nevertheless, the charge offered a clarity – or at least a visibility – that made it reminiscent of chivalric jousts: the cavalry rushed forward, all 600 men functioning as a unit, and then (what was left of it) rushed back. And the duel at the center of \textit{Maud} replaces the confusions of the “civil war” in which Britain was enmeshed with what seems to be a simple one-on-one confrontation.\textsuperscript{40} Still, these instances of violence proved more complex than is suggested by their straightforward appearances; for all their invocations of the chivalric past, Tennyson’s Crimean War poems are far from offering clarity.

Childe Roland’s quest takes its direction from an ambiguously pointed finger (line 16) – the very gesture that was said to be responsible for the charge at Balaklava, when Captain Nolan, the officer who delivered the fateful order, supposedly pointed the cavalry in the wrong direction. As it happens, Tennyson’s two Crimean poems are plagued by issues of a different kind of finger-pointing: of determining responsibility. Shannon and Ricks have argued how “The Charge” attempts to avoid assessing blame by not naming names in its finalized version (the one name included in the version first published in the \textit{Examiner} was Nolan’s: “Take the guns,” Nolan said” (line 6)).\textsuperscript{41} But with “blunder” so central to both event and poem, the question “whose?” cannot be so easily dispensed with. If the poem describes a collective act of bravery based upon the revocation of individual will or judgement (“Their’s not to reason why”), it also suggests the possibility of a collective responsibility for the charge (a silent “Ours”).

In contrast, an unmistakable atmosphere of guilt and blame pervades \textit{Maud}. But the issue of responsibility arises most forcefully in regard to the private duel that results in the death of Maud’s brother. Tucker has discussed the odc ambiguities surrounding the start of Part II, “The fault was mine, the fault was mine,” calling this line “both the most naked admission of responsibility in all of \textit{Maud} and the most resistant to personal attribution. ‘The fault was mine’; but the words are whose? They repeat what the brother has said, yet obviously they tell the hero’s truth too.”\textsuperscript{42} And as in “The Charge,” culpability for death spreads like a disease through the poem, simultaneously implicating everyone and no one in the tragedy. Aggravating the sense of free-floating responsibility, the duel itself happens in the interstice of the poem, in the gap between Parts I and II. By the time events are described, they are already over, giving the impression that nothing could have been done to prevent them. “What is it, that has been done?” (I.7), the speaker wonders, the passive construction indicating the degree to which he is dissociated from his own deed, which becomes not an act of individual will but rather yet another manifestation of a diseased culture.

The speaker’s question about the duel also resonates with the broader confusions of “The Charge,” which describes an event that (as we have seen) proved just as difficult to account for. At the heart of the ballad, immediately following its “germ” – the acknowledgement that “Some one had blundered” – come the three lines of the poem that speak most directly (even if in the negative) to the issue of hermeneutical uncertainty:

\begin{quote}
Their’s not to make reply,
Their’s not to reason why,
Their’s but to do and die. (lines 11–16)
\end{quote}

Suggestively, the reply-why-die rhyme is repeated in a curiously parallel passage of \textit{Maud}: the “Courage, poor heart of stone!” lyric:

\begin{quote}
Courage, poor heart of stone!
I will not ask thee why
Thou canst not understand
That thou art left for ever alone:
Courage, poor stupid heart of stone.
Or if I ask thee why,
Care thou not to reply:
She is but dead, and the time is at hand
When thou shalt die more than die. (I.132–140)
\end{quote}

This lyric occupies a similarly central position in the longer work, following hard upon the memory of the duel, in which issues of responsibility and agency appeared so opaque, and immediately preceding its “germ,” “O that twere possible” (I. 141–148).

Written in the first two weeks of August 1855, “Courage, poor heart of stone!” marks Tennyson’s earliest revision of \textit{Maud} after the poem’s publication, and it was added in part to make Maud’s death clear.\textsuperscript{43} Yet
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instead threatens to spiral on endlessly without synthesis. Recall Trudi Tate's comments on the ballad: "Two contradictory impulses drive Tennyson's poem and other writings about the charge: to interpret, endlessly, and to bring to an end interpretation. It must stop; it cannot stop." All that the poems leave us with for consolation are their imperatives: "Charge," "Forward," "Honour," and, most urgently, "Courage."

Courage was precisely what ballads like Maud's unrecorded song and Tennyson's "Charge" were designed to give. While Maud's song may remain unrecorded, Tennyson's didn't. "The Charge" was chosen to immortalize the poet's voice on to Edison's newly invented wax cylinders in 1890. Although it was made in part to promote the recently formed Light Brigade Relief Fund (to support the remaining survivors of the charge), the choice is unsurprising, given that both Crimean poems have a history of being read aloud — and even of being sung. The incantatory nature of "The Charge" comes out beautifully in Tennyson's recitation for the phonograph, which sounds not unlike the "something between a croak and a song." Virginia Woolf attributes to Mr. Ramsay's rendition of the ballad in To the Lighthouse (1927), during his enactment of the charge on his front lawn. And apparently, the soldiers to whom the poem was originally dedicated also felt song to be the natural way in which to voice their love for it. In a letter to Forster, Tennyson quoted the request of a chaplain in the Crimea for copies of "The Charge" (he eventually sent two thousand): "It is the greatest favourite of the soldiers — half are singing it and all want to have on black and white — so as to read — what has so taken them. Although they may have desired texts for the purposes of reading, the soldiers' initial impulse towards song seems appropriate to a poem so perfectly written for recital, with or without music. Indeed, Rudyard Kipling points to this quality in "The Last of the Light Brigade" (1890), written in response to the sad story of the apparently unsuccessful Fund (note the further pun on charge, as it is converted into an economic register): "Our children's children are to glory in 'honour the charge they made'! And we leave to the streets and the workhouse the charge of the Light Brigade." Even a child can memorize Tennyson's ballad.

While Maud's length precludes such memorization, it is also a poem of the voice. In his investigation of the work as monodrama, Dwight Culler points to the genre's close relationship with performance, and especially musical performance — R. J. Mann is not the only one to comment on Maud's "word-music." And then, of course, there is Tennyson's obsession with reading the poem aloud, an obsession so marked as to have
become the subject of Woolf's satire in her play *Freshwater* (written in 1923). As in "The Charge," voiced repetition seems to be a crucial part of the story, of how meaning is generated by the poem. Tennyson's proclivity may have owed something to his desire to prove the critics wrong about his cherished work, but his ability to prove them wrong through recital is also interesting. As Hallam Tennyson remarked, "It is notable that two such appreciative critics as Mr. Gladstone and Dr. Van Dyke wholly misapprehended the meaning of *Maud* until they first heard my father read it, and that they both then publicly recanted their first criticisms [of the poem's violent militarism]." Elizabeth Barrett Browning was also impressed, declaring of the reading of *Maud* at her home on September 27, 1855 (at which Dante Gabriel Rossetti sketched the poet performing): "It was wonderful; tender, beautiful, and he read exquisitely in a voice like an organ, rather music than speech."*144*

Linda Hughes has argued of the repeated readings that "Tennyson's eccentricity may suggest that only by hearing *Maud* do we understand it fully."*145* And in fact, the poet himself said as much in a letter to Charles Richard Weld: "I think that properly to appreciate it you ought to hear the author read it."*146* But maybe the readings converted so many listeners precisely because they allowed their contemporary audiences to understand the poem not fully but partially— that is, to close off and fix interpretation in a manner that permitted the work to fit in more easily with Victorian conventions, whether pro- or anti-war. I am reminded of the Romantic understanding of closet drama as a mode that refines such fixed meaning, especially given that Tennyson called his poem a "little *Hamlet*," thus associating it with a play that was revered by the Romantics for its readerly qualities: all those soliloquies, all that meditative inaction. Charles Lamb described his response to having seen a great performance of a play by Shakespeare in his youth:

> It seemed to embody and realize conceptions which had hitherto assumed no distinct shape. But dearly do we pay all our life after for this juvenile pleasure, this sense of distinctness. When the novelty is past, we find to our cost that instead of realizing an idea, we have only materialized and brought down a fine vision to the standard of flesh and blood."*147*

Lamb disliked such fixation, preferring the open possibilities of the reading experience. But when dealing with events as complex and troubling to conventional beliefs as those of the Crimean War, "distinctness"—of any kind—would have been perhaps rather comforting than the reverse. Hallam's recollection of his father's mode of reading—"The passion in the first Canto was given by my father in a sort of rushing recitative through the long sweeping lines of satire and invective"—suggests how interpretation became set in the process.*148* Alternatively, the focus on musicality that characterized so many listeners' responses to the poem could have allowed them to avoid some of its more disquieting aspects by calling forth an emotional rather than a rationally coherent response.

Tennyson's recorded recital of "The Charge" draws a similarly emotional response: it is almost impossible not to feel a surge forward along with the verse. Such declamation brings poetry into the realm of action; as Tennyson puts it in "The Charge of the Heavy Brigade," "The song that nerves a nation's heart, / Is in itself a deed" (Epilogue, lines 79–80), a convenient belief for an armchair poet of war. Woolf draws on this aspect of the poem's effect in *To the Lighthouse* when she imagines Mr. Ramsey being propelled forward by his performance of the poem: it becomes an act, a physical "Charge." Yet if the ballad can "nerve" when recited, reading it somehow unnerves (for all that the poem obscures signs of the kind of unhinged nerves so prevalent in *Maud*). And as Eric Griffiths has argued, "Tennysonian eloquence leads a double life: it invites and repays voicing, it also asks for constant recognition of the quieter life of the words on the page."*149* This quieter life allows us to hear the uncertainties expressed by "The Charge of the Light Brigade," uncertainties that manifest Tennyson's difficulties in responding to this perplexing war.

But nothing is quieter than the silent presence of Maud's ballad. Perhaps the ballad is silent because, as I have suggested, the poem's form could only have allowed us to hear it through the muddying medium of the speaker's unhinged voice. Or perhaps Maud's battle-song can't be written down because, in the wider context—not only of *Maud* but of the Crimean War—to write it down would be to open it up to suspicious readings (like that to which I and others have subjected "The Charge") from which Tennyson wished to preserve it. But maybe its very silence provides the purest expression of the bewildering problems faced by the poets of the Crimean War—and their most perfect solution. Not only a song that can no longer be sung (the pure chivalric values it espouses having passed into history), Maud's ballad can also be thought of as a song that cannot yet be sung, a ghostly precursor to the protest poems of later wars.