Wars of Seeing: Suffering and Sentiment in Joseph Wright’s *The Dead Soldier*

Philip Shaw

I

In eighteenth-century British culture, military painting can be roughly divided into two distinct forms: portraits and battle scenes. Portraits, such as Sir Joshua Reynolds’s *Portrait of John, Marquis of Granby in the uniform of Col. of Royal Regiment of Horse Guards* (c.1770), helped to establish an image of the man at arms as noble, beneficent and fiercely loyal, while battle scenes, which focussed typically on victories rather than defeats, were prized for their topographical and historical accuracy, and for their ability to instil a sense of national pride. For all their sublime ambitions, battle scenes painted in Britain in this period fail, on the whole to match the aesthetic heights established by Uccello in *The Battle of San Romano* (1438-40), or by Rubens in *Henry IV at the Battle of Ivry* (1627-1630). Similarly, of the numerous military portraits produced in this century only a handful could be described as distinguished in any genuine artistic sense. Notable examples would include, in addition to Reynolds’s innovative portrayals of Granby and Colonel Tarleton (1782), John Singleton Copley’s *The Death of Major Peirson, 6 January 1781* (1783), and, perhaps most notably, Benjamin West’s *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770). West’s and Copley’s portraits are remarkable for two reasons. First, from a stylistic point of view, both paintings overturn the conventions of history painting, which dictated that historical figures should be clothed in classical attire. Both Wolfe and Peirson, together with their attendants, are shown in modern, military dress, thus imbuing the timelessness of the scene with documentary significance. Second, in both cases, the allusion to the Medieval and Renaissance *pietà* tradition, in which the dead or dying Christ is shown cradled in the arms of
Mary, helps to establish an impression of noble sacrifice: the officer-hero is Christ-like insofar as he gives his life so that we, the nation, might be free.²

In terms of how death and wounding on the field of battle were perceived by eighteenth-century audiences, the apotheosis of the military leader served a distinct ideological function. To adapt Elaine Scarry’s analysis, in the military pietà ‘the incontestable reality of the body – the body in pain, the body maimed, the body dead and hard to dispose of – is separated from its source and conferred on an ideology or issue or instance of political authority impatient of, or deserted by, benign sources of substantiation.’ The body of Wolfe or Peirson, that is, serves to draw attention away from war’s investment in the ‘activity of reciprocal injuring’.³ By focussing on the officer-hero’s indifference to pain, his ability to withstand even the most calamitous event, the viewer thus becomes indifferent to the all-too-human carnage that state-sponsored representations seek to occlude.

An important aspect of this process of occlusion is the success of the viewer’s schooling in the discourse of the sublime. In the eighteenth century, as is well known, the concept of the sublime was taken up with alacrity by political economists, social theorists and moral philosophers as well as by aestheticians. In essence, meditations on sublimity were linked to larger discussions of how individuals and states orientate themselves in relation to experiences of shock, terror or pain. Key to the management of shock is the cultivation of aesthetic distance. As Edmund Burke comments, when ‘danger or death press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful’. In the aesthetic contemplation of scenes of distress, such as the view of a dead or dying soldier, ‘objects which in the reality would shock’ become the source of ‘a very high species
of pleasure’. Our delight, however, is touched also by feelings of sympathy, which
Burke describes as ‘a sort of substitution, by which we are put into the place of
another man, and affected in many respects as he is affected’. 4 When we observe the
dying hero bearing his wounds with dignity and calm we subtly reciprocate his
capacity for stoical endurance; we become, in other words, ourselves a noble man at
arms.

The relations between sublimity and the management of pain have a
particular connection with conceptions of military prowess. As John Baillie argues in
An Essay on the Sublime (1747) ‘the affections’ deemed ‘unquestionably sublime’
are ‘heroism, or desire of conquest, such as in Alexander or Caesar; love of one’s
country’ and ‘the contempt of death’. 5 Likewise in James Beattie’s Dissertations
Moral and Critical (1783), the military leader, ‘notwithstanding his violent nature’ is
admired for his ‘strength of mind’, his ‘self-command’, his ‘intrepidity in danger’,
his ‘coolness [. . .] in the midst of perplexity’ and for his ‘unwearied activity’. These
qualities, Beattie concludes, ‘are astonishing’. 6 Of all these qualities, it is the leader’s
ability to endure suffering that astonishes the most. Shortly after the death of General
Wolfe at Quebec in 1759, the London Chronicle published a poetic epitaph in which
the ‘noble spirit’ is extolled for his dignity in the face of death. Like Cato, he
sacrifices himself, calmly and without protest, for the greater good. 7 In the same
year, Adam Smith, in The Theory of Moral Sentiments, praises the military genius as
the man who, amidst ‘the hardships and hazards of war, maintains this control of his
passive feelings [. . .] He does not merely affect the sentiments of the impartial
spectator; he really adopts them. He almost identifies himself with, he almost
becomes himself that impartial spectator.’ 8 What the hero’s sacrifice communicated
to civilian spectators of war was, effectively, a lesson in self-abnegation. As Adam
Ferguson announced in 1767, ‘he who has not learned to resign his personal freedom in the field [with] the same magnanimity with which he maintains it in the political deliberations of his country, has yet to learn the most important lesson of civil society, and is only fit to occupy a place in a rude, or in a corrupted state.’ When faced, therefore, with the image of the dying Wolfe, the spectator is expected to identify with the officer hero’s self-command, ‘to become himself that impartial spectator’.

II

Let us bear this lesson in mind as we turn now to consider a very different depiction of the sufferings of war. This is Joseph Wright’s painting of The Dead Soldier (fig1), exhibited at the Royal Academy exhibition at Somerset House in May 1789 on the cusp of the French Revolution. In a rare departure from traditional military portraiture, the painting depicts a grieving widow and her newly orphaned child beside the body of an unidentified British soldier, a victim of the recent American War of Independence or possibly, for reasons that will become apparent, of the Seven Years War. Immediately, our attention is captured by the steady gaze of the naked baby and the despairing attitude of the mother. This is not an image of noble sacrifice or triumphalism; the effects of war, the painting suggests, extend beyond the field of battle, blighting the lives of ordinary civilians as well as ordinary soldiers. On this basis, it is tempting to regard The Dead Soldier as a contribution to an emergent ‘anti-war’ culture; the visual equivalent of the numerous protest poems published in the wake of Britain’s entry into the war against revolutionary and Napoleonic France. As we shall see, however, the political significance of the painting’s imagery is rather more complex than this.
Surprisingly, given its undoubtedly disturbing content, Wright’s *Dead Soldier* proved to be extremely popular with the gallery-going public, and for many years it was esteemed as the painter’s most artistically successful work. In 1797, Wright’s obituary stated that ‘The Dead Soldier … would alone establish his fame’. By 1814, when the work came up for auction, it was described as Wright’s ‘acknowledged *Chef d’œuvre* … uniting great knowledge of grouping, excellent drawing, and correct colouring, with a fine feeling of sentiment’. The fact that the print was still in production as late as 1829 testifies to its enduring popularity: more than the candle light paintings of the 1760s, or the celebrated storm and fireworks paintings of Wright’s later years, it was the image of a grieving widow clutching the wrist of her dead soldier husband, as she nurses her innocent babe, that captured the public imagination both during and beyond the war years.

But how, precisely, did viewers of the time respond to *The Dead Soldier*? When the fashionable Whig poet, William Hayley viewed the painting he declared it to be the ‘flower of the royal exhibition. His dying soldier made me literally shed tears.’ In light of what has been said thus far on the emulation of the officer-hero’s *sangfroid* how should we understand this extreme and potentially dissident display of sensibility? Bearing Hayley’s literary background in mind it is likely that the poet would have recognized the allusion in the accompanying exhibition catalogue to ‘Langhorn’s [sic] poems’. Since its publication in the mid 1770s, John Langhorne’s verses on the aftermath of the Seven Years War, from his long poem *The Country Justice*, had become something of a byword for sentimental depictions of military suffering. The lines are as follows:
Cold on Canadian Hills, or Minden’s Plain,
Perhaps that Parent mourn’d her soldier Slain;
Bent o’er her Babe, her Eye dissolv’d in Dew,
The big Drops, mingling with the Milk He Drew,
Gave the sad Presage of his future Years,
The Child of Misery, Baptiz’d in Tears!\(^{17}\)

The image of the dead soldier, his grieving widow and orphaned child resonated with the book-buying public. More often than not this image was praised for its beauty and was frequently cited in sentimental literature as an incentive for acts of charity. In the anonymous *Adventures of a Hackney Coach* (1783), for instance, the sight of a semi-naked female beggar nursing a child prompts a worthy gentleman to provide assistance and to acknowledge ‘divine Langhorne!’ for having ‘beautifully … pictured a scene like that just before me’.\(^{18}\) A few years later, Charlotte Smith, in *Rural Walks* (1795), cites Langhorne as support for charitable acts. ‘On these occasions’, opines the fictional donor, Mrs Woodfield, ‘I seldom fail to recollect some beautiful lines of Langhorne’s, which contain a pathetic apology for the unhappy wanderers called common beggars’. Located at a strategic point in the narrative when, confronted by the sight of a beggar, a party of young women debate the rights and wrongs of indiscriminate charity, Langhorne’s ‘pathetic apology’ effectively suspends the question of whether or not the beggar is ‘an idle vagabond’ or a ‘poor man … accidentally distressed in a strange country’.\(^{19}\) Scenes of distress, in other words, whether presented in poetry, prints, or in real life communicate suffering by way of a direct appeal to the heart, rather than to the head.
But what connection do these lines have with *The Dead Soldier*? To answer this question we must consider the events that inspired Langhorne’s verses. In 1759, both Minden and Quebec were widely hailed as the crowning victories of the Allied campaigns against the French. But whilst these battles undoubtedly signalled a turn in the fortunes of the Seven Years War, favourable to the British and their allies, the peace, when it came, proved an equivocal blessing, placing a considerable burden on the economic as well as the physical resources of the nation. By the time of the signing of the Treaty of Paris, the national debt had almost doubled and the severe taxation measures, put in to effect to relieve the economy, had a deleterious effect, not only on relations with the colonies but also, more immediately, on the domestic purse. Returning soldiers and their families, in particular, faced severe financial hardships as a result of their endeavours overseas. As the dissenting preacher, Ebenezer Radcliffe opined in 1762:

> Whether we consider the numbers of combatants concern’d, or the many engagements that have been fought; the present war has been the most fatal the world ever saw. In the space of six years there have been above twenty pitch’d battles, in which above a hundred thousand men have fallen by the sword, besides innumerable multitudes who have been destroyed by sickness, cold, and famine … look into those melancholy villages, and tell me where their wretched inhabitants are fled. – The tottering tenements falling into dust, make a grave for those who once inhabited them. – All is solemn silence; – or if there be a cry heard, it is the lamentations of orphans and widows for a father, a brother, or a husband slain in battle. ²⁰
Radcliff’s attentions are directed to the sufferings of war’s victims overseas, but the
effects of war on the home front, as Jacob Jefferson informed the mainly academic
congregation of St. Mary’s, Oxford on 5 May 1763, were also severe:

But great and important as our conquests and acquisitions are, they can
hardly afford any joy, when it is considered how dearly purchased they
were with the blood of thousands of our gallant countrymen; and how
many parents, widows and orphans are left disconsolate and destitute to
bemoan the loss. But affecting as this is, it is perhaps not the worst. For
we are ready to think even these happy, who fell in a foreign climate, and
saw their native country no more, in comparison of those maimed
miserable objects, sad monuments of the worse than brutal encounters of
a day of battle, that now so frequently fall in our way, and at the sight of
whom our very bowels yearn within us.21

One important factor, bearing on the composition of these sermons, concerns
the government’s failure, both during and after the war, to provide adequate care for
the children of deceased servicemen. As the author of An Account of the Foundling
Hospital in London observed: ‘the greater part of [the children] admitted at this time,
had been made orphans by the battle of Minden’.22 Founded in 1739 by the
philanthropic sea captain Thomas Coran, the Foundling Hospital was established as a
children’s home for the education and maintenance of ‘exposed and deserted young
children’.23 In 1756, at the outbreak of the Seven Years War, the hospital came
under the jurisdiction of parliament and the philanthropist Jonas Hanway was elected
governor. Hanway, who maintained a keen interest in military and naval charities, was an appropriate choice, not least in respect of his advocacy of population increase as a means of sustaining the war effort. Under the new policy, funded by government, the hospital was thus required to open its doors to all children and the maximum age for admission was raised from two to twelve months. In less than four years nearly 15,000 children were presented to the hospital, a sum that pleased Hanway, who noted in his own account of the hospital that a ‘great number of those who might [otherwise] be sleeping with their fathers in church yards’ were now available to ‘the navies and armies’.24 The hospital, in other words, could now be regarded as a mechanism for producing both the agents and the victims of destruction; an irony that may not have been lost on viewers of Hogarth’s *March to Finchley*, a painting on display in one of the hospital’s public rooms since 1750. For just as the soldiers in *The March to Finchley*, although ostensibly released by military discipline from the anti-social chaos of the painting’s foreground march ultimately to their deaths, so the hospital’s open door policy was designed to feed, rather than relieve, the devastations of war.

Another, more immediate, but no less unfortunate consequence of the open door policy was a marked increase in the numbers of homeless children found wandering the countryside, as poor parishes, in a bid to reduce spending on the poor, sent their orphans to London. By 1772, the year in which Langhorne was appointed Justice of the Peace to the county of Somerset, the ‘lamentations’ of numerous wandering orphans and widows, together with the cries of the maimed and the destitute may well have promoted the poet to revise his opinion of his country’s triumphs. And like his fellow clergymen, Radcliff and Jefferson, the figure of the orphan, which the rational mind conceived as an undesirable consequence of the
The government’s military-fiscal policy, was adapted by the poet as a sentimental and highly potent symbol of national waste and ruin.

*The Country Justice*, the poem in which Langhorne addresses this figure, was published in three parts in 1774, 1775 and 1777. A popular and critical success, the poem as a whole takes issue with the old Poor Laws, and lays particular stress on the humane treatment of beggars and vagrants. In his capacity as a magistrate, Langhorne would have been familiar with the uncompromising tone of English statutes on the homeless in this period. In Michael Dalton’s *The Country Justice*, for instance, a manual for Justices of the Peace dating from the late seventeenth century and reissued with revisions throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, the chapter on ‘Rogues and Vagabonds’ states that ‘[i]dleness, which of itself is the root of all evil’ should be ‘very much repressed’. Having decried the ‘[i]nfinite swarms of idle Vagabonds … which wander up and down, to the great danger and indignity of our Nation’, Dalton advises that such persons should be ‘stripped naked from the middle upwards, and … whipped till their Body be bloody’ prior to being sent to a house of correction for no less than a year. Although the law relating to rogues and vagabonds was amended in 1740, it remained within the power of Justices of the Peace to sentence vagrants to corporal punishment and to lengthy periods of incarceration.

Langhorne’s poem was in fact suggested by his friend and sponsor Richard Burn, Justice of the Peace for the counties of Westmorland and Cumberland and the respected author of several legal manuals and commentaries. In his 1764 *History of the Poor Laws*, Burn observes that the history of British laws concerning vagrants resembles ‘the history of the savages in America. Almost all severities have been exercised against vagrants, except scalping’. Burn goes on to catalogue the
punishments meted out to vagrants since ‘the turbulent times of the great barons’, which ranged from pillorying and whipping, to starving, branding and other forms of mutilation. Since none of these measures have lessened the numbers of vagrants

Burn’s conclusion is that ‘punishment alone is not sufficient. Therefore the remedy must be sought elsewhere’. The remedy he proposes is radical: outlaw the practice of giving ‘well meant but very ill judged charity’ and begging, he argues, ‘would be at an end in a fortnight’ since the onus for managing and maintaining the poor would then fall on parishes rather than on individuals.27

The author’s critique of the laws and punishments concerning vagrants extends to the treatment of disbanded soldiers and seamen. Despite the fact that the amended poor laws made allowances for the movements of returning soldiers, Burn notes that soldiers lacking appropriate certification from their commanding officers could be arrested for vagrancy and treated accordingly.28 The wives and children of deceased soldiers were no less vulnerable. Prior to the introduction of the national welfare system, created to assist the families of men serving in the British Army and Navy during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, women and children were dependent on the parish-based poor relief system. On arriving at her place of settlement, a widow was required to present herself to the Justice of the Peace who would then be obliged, on the understanding that the dead soldier had ‘continued faithful to his Trust, and not deserted the same by taking up Arms’ against the crown, to apply to the County Treasurer for relief on the woman’s behalf.29 If the woman was unable to prove her settlement or if relief, for whatever reason, was not made available, she could find herself charged under the vagrancy laws. As The Laws Respecting Women, published in 1777, stated: ‘[w]omen wandering and begging in parishes and places to which they do not belong’ were to be conveyed to
a justice, ‘who shall examine her, and commit her to the house of correction’ and
‘who may if they see convenient, order her to be publicly whipped’.30

Disturbed, like Burn, by the legislative harshness of the Poor Laws, particularly as they applied to the wandering poor, Langhorne, in *The Country Justice*, encourages his audience in the exercise of Christian principles of pity, mercy, and love. In the poem’s ‘Apology for Vagrants’, the poet invites his readers to ‘feel, while [the poor Vagrant] complains, / Nor from sad Freedom send to sadder chains’. Most significantly, he asks his readers to judge all vagrants sympathetically, irrespective of whether or not their present condition is the result of ‘Folly or Misfortune’. Prompted by the culture of sentiment, with its emphasis on empathy and feeling, the poet and the preacher seem at odds with the coolly rational mind of the county magistrate. But where Langhorne departs most evidently from the views of his legal mentor is in his support for a system of law based on rural patronage. While Burn, for the most part, criticizes the haphazard and ill-managed practises of the existing paternalistic system of charity, arguing that local administration should be given over to paid overseers recruited from the ranks of the middle-classes,31 Langhorne seeks to recall the days ‘when WEALTH was Virtue’s Handmaid’ and ‘the Poor at Hand their natural Patrons saw’. The poet’s emphasis on the visibility of the rural patron goes hand in hand with his stress on the inherent virtue of individual acts of charity, particularly with regard to the practice of extending relief to the wandering rural poor.

As the literary critic Beth Fowkes Tobin suggests, a centralized system designed to prohibit the ‘face-to-face dispensing of charity’ was regarded with suspicion by defenders of the local, paternal system on the grounds that it diminished the number of opportunities available for the exercise of private judgement and thus
inhibited the cultivation of private virtue. For men of sentiment, like Langhorne, there was moreover a direct connection between private virtue and the common good. In the case of alms giving to the victims of war, the charitable gesture worked on a number of levels: providing immediate material relief whilst also serving to cement the bonds between civilians and soldiers.

Soldiers too were expected to demonstrate feeling. As Edward Penny’s 1764 painting of *The Marquis of Granby Giving Alms to a Sick Soldier and his Family* illustrates, the charitable act of the military hero effectively bridges the divide between the private and the public spheres, enabling the viewer to regard the man of war as, at the same time, a man of peace. Writing in 1760, in *An Account of the Society for the Encouragement of British Troops in Germany and North America*, Jonas Hanway had argued that ‘the distinction of the private soldier and the officer … is absorbed in the consideration of the virtue of the man’. The idea that military service could inspire feelings of ‘reverence’ in the breast of the ordinary citizen, a feeling of respect so strong as to effectively collapse the division between civilians and soldiers, leads Hanway to make the following, extraordinary claim as he imagines an encounter with a vagrant soldier:

Does it not wound a generous heart, to see a brave fellow begging his bread on his journey, perhaps without the least consideration of any vice which has distressed him: perhaps after being lavish of his blood, with a view to support his wife and children, or merely doing his duty as a soldier? If such persons can consistently be relieved, will it not rejoice those, who are sensible of the blessings they enjoy, in consequence of the gallant behaviour of the very man whose wants they supply?
The sight of a poverty-stricken soldier wounds a generous heart. What the soldier experiences in his body is thus transferred to the psyche of the civilian observer. Significantly, in an allusion, perhaps, to Adam Smith’s comments on the compensatory effects of tears, the bestowal of the psychic wound prompts an awareness in the ‘sensible’, or rational, person of the economic benefits of military sacrifice: specifically, that person is made aware of the relations between civilized ‘blessings’ and ‘gallant behaviour’. In a final moralizing flourish, Hanway claims that charity will ‘diffuse a spirit of benevolence’ for ‘our mutual advantage’.34

Some ten years later, Henry Mackenzie’s best-selling novel of sensibility, *The Man of Feeling*, provides a related lesson in how to behave when confronted with the sight of misfortune. In chapter 24, the novel’s protagonist, Mr Harley, becomes reacquainted with his childhood friend John Edwards, a pauperized tenant farmer turned soldier:

He was one of those figures which Salvator would have drawn; nor was the surrounding scenery unlike the wildness of that painter’s backgrounds … A rock with some dangling wild flowers, jutted out above where the soldier lay, on which grew the stump of a large tree, white with age, and a single twisted branch shaded his face as he slept … He had that steady look of sorrow, which indicates that its owner has gazed upon his griefs until he has forgotten how to lament them.35

Couched, by way of the allusion to the paintings of Salvator Rosa, in the rhetoric of the natural sublime, the discharged soldier is depicted as ‘wild’, ‘twisted’ and
sorrowful; his years of promise brutally curtailed. The story Edwards relates to Harley is, accordingly, unflinching in its portrayal of the material rigours and injustices of military life and culminates in a typically lachrymose pledge of mutual love:

When Edwards had ended his relation, Harley stood for a while looking at him in silence; at last he pressed him in his arms, and when he had given full vent to the fullness of his heart by a shower of tears, ‘Edwards, said he, let me hold thee to my bosom, let me imprint the virtue of thy sufferings on my soul. Come, my honoured veteran! Let me endeavour to soften the last days of a life, worn out in the service of humanity: call me also your son, and let me cherish you as a father.’ Edwards, from whom the recollection of his own sufferings had scarce forced a tear, now blubbered like a boy; he could not speak his gratitude, but by some short exclamations of blessings upon Harley.³⁶

Like Hanway’s wounded heart, Harley imprints ‘the virtue’ of the soldier’s ‘sufferings’ on his soul. Although separated by class, the two men are united in a quasi-familial bond with Harley claiming Edwards as a surrogate father. But mutual tears cannot disguise the fact that the terms of patronage are weighted heavily in favour of Harley. It is Edwards, after all, who blubbers ‘like a boy’, and the landowner’s decision to bestow on his ‘father’ a small farm is of a piece with the ‘vertical links’ of rural patronage.

Standing before Wright’s Dead Soldier, William Hayley might have felt compelled to reciprocate Harley’s behaviour by imprinting the image of the soldier’s
sacrifice on his soul, and like many other viewers he may well have gone on to relay this virtue through the exercise of charitable relief. The belief that aesthetic delight in the presentation of suffering encouraged benevolence did not, however, go unopposed. The moral philosopher Dugald Stewart, for instance, in his *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, maintained that fictional representations of misery deaden the ‘active habits … the sensibility which terminates in imagination, is but a refined and selfish luxury … nothing can advance our moral improvement, but an attention to the active duties which belong to our stations’. More prescient perhaps than he intended, Stewart’s comments get to the heart of the matter. For there is nothing intrinsically virtuous about shedding tears before a graphic depiction of suffering and nor, for that matter, is there anything progressive in the exercise of charitable relief. What the charitable transaction masks, that is, is a conservative attachment to ‘stations’. In terms of military charity, as Hanway points out, ‘[t]he truth is, that such kindnesses … have at all times fired the soldier’s breast with the greatest resolution, confirmed his fidelity, and created a more generous contempt of death’. Charity works, in other words, to enforce the bonds of patronage, which spur the common soldier on in pursuit of his country’s glory. The soldier, in short, will become a better killer if he is properly treated.

As we have seen, the benefactor is no less altered; through sensibility of the soldier’s sacrifice, the person of rank is united with the common soldier in mutual recognition of the greater good. Charity, so the argument runs, is to the benefit of all. Yet perhaps this is not the entire story for, to extend Stewart’s terms, that sensibility which terminates in imagination only, which stands fixated before the signs of visible distress unable to convey feeling into action, may be symptomatic, not merely
of an attitude of ‘selfish luxury’, but also, perhaps, of a rising undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the very terms in which military sacrifice is understood.

It is with this thought in mind that I wish to turn to a closer consideration of the painting itself. How should we as spectators – impartial or otherwise – respond to the arresting gaze of the orphaned child? In a restricted sense, and with a glance back to the conservative ideologies of Jonas Hanway, Richard Burn, and indeed John Langhorne, Wright may have desired his audience to respond to the infant’s gaze with an attitude of parental concern. ‘This Love [for children]’, as the philosopher Francis Hutcheson argues, ‘makes them Parts of ourselves …. And where-ever we find a Determination … to mutual Love, let each Individual be look’d upon as a Part of a great Whole, or System, and concern himself in the publick Good of it.’ By exercising our capacity for ‘mutual love’, the child will be returned to the bosom of the nation, where, presumably, it will be nurtured and protected from further violation. Such a reading might well explain the sentimental tears of Hayley, a man who, despite his opposition to the war with America, could yet regard military painting as an important instrument for the dissemination of patriotic feeling. In a related vein, for all its pathos and horror, one might argue that The Dead Soldier provides sentimental compensation for war, with the orphaned child functioning as a spur to aesthetic and social unification, the part returned to its place in the whole.

But there is, I believe, something excessive about the child’s gaze that seems to militate against this conservative reading. For unlike Wright’s earlier works there is no representation within the picture that will serve as a model for the resurrection of the public good. In the absence of such a model, the viewer outside the frame is forced to look inwards – and what does this viewer find? In the highlighting of the mother’s breast, a disturbing eroticism militating against the transcendence of the
sensual; in the attention given to the makeshift shelter, a model of the temporary or vagrant nature of the private sphere, an ‘artistic’ enclosure threatened by the encroachment of battle. Still further, when a comparison is made with a slightly later version of the painting, some additional details become apparent.

In the version of The Dead Soldier held in the collection of the San Francisco Legion of Honor museum a somewhat crudely rendered battle scene has been added to the background, placing further emphasis on the harmful relations between the military and domestic spheres. The painter has also intensified the colouring of the original version, shrouding the family group in chiaroscuro, highlighting the scarlet of the soldier’s jacket and the dark blue of the widow’s dress. If we look closely we also note the soldier’s gangrenous hand, a touch of morbidity echoed in the cuts and bruises on the widow’s neck. For whatever reason, Wright felt moved in this version of the painting to exceed the discourse of sentiment; as we gaze on the painting’s stark presentation of the decaying body – both the decaying body of the soldier and, by metaphorical extension, the decaying social body that is the family – the discourse of sentiment works hard to overcome creeping sensations of pain, terror and disgust. In this version of The Dead Soldier, I would suggest, the beneficent viewer no longer considers the opportunities that war presents for the exercise of private virtue; instead he is brought into an uncomfortable encounter with the underlying matter of war: its investment in waste and ruin and the reciprocal destruction of human beings.

III

The idea of The Dead Soldier as an anti-war painting is complicated, however, when we consider the influence of Wright’s patron, the Manchester silk manufacturer, militia leader, and art collector, John Leigh Philips. From correspondence exchanged
between Wright and Philips in the spring of 1789 it is evident that Philips purchased The Dead Soldier, framed, for 100 guineas. In 1814, the painting was listed in A Catalogue of the Valuable Collection of Paintings and Drawings, Prints and Etchings ... of the Late John Leigh Philips. Clearly, Wright’s work was much prized by its owner. But what, precisely, was the nature of the relationship between painter and patron and what significance did a painting like The Dead Soldier have for a man like Philips?

Born 23 November 1761, John Leigh Philips was the son of John Philips, founder of the Manchester cotton spinning firm, Philips and Lee and a prominent Unitarian. Like most narratives of mercantile self-fashioning, interest in the socially progressive values of Unitarianism began to wane as the Philips moved from the margins to the centre of society, so much so that by 1824, the year of John Philips’s death, the family’s Unitarian background had been effectively erased, as Philips’s obituary describes ‘his unshaken loyalty to the King, and the most decided attachment to his country, its Constitution, and its established Religion.’ An indicator of the Philips’s growth in social prestige and power is given by the fact that John Philips was appointed a Justice of the Peace for Lancashire and Cheshire, and Chairman of the Magistrates at Stockport, appointments that would only have been made to a man in possession of a large fortune and no longer associated with business.

When Philips’s sons, John Leigh and Francis reached maturity, their social legitimacy was confirmed through membership of a number of high-ranking loyalist institutions: these included, in the late 1770s, the Royal Manchester Volunteers, in which the young John Leigh served, without seeing active service, as second Lieutenant and, in the 1790s, the Manchester and Salford Volunteers, which John
Leigh commanded from 1797-1804. As Mark Philp’s comments, ‘leadership of a volunteer corps was seen as a just expression of [the Manchester manufacturers] claim to high office within the community ... a chance to bestow paternalism and display wealth’. It also provided such men with an opportunity to declare, disseminate, and ultimately substantiate an ideology based on loyalty to the Crown and the Constitution. In the words of a handbill, circulated in 1776, the Royal Manchester Volunteers thus sought to unite all ‘Gallant and Loyal Lancashire Men, Who wish to share the Honors of their KING, and to suppress the daring Spirit of Rebellion, which hath been so presumptuously cherished and supported by the open and secret Enemies to his Majesty and the British Constitution’.

As the Philips’s became more secure in their commercial and social standing, its members came to adopt the values and beliefs of the conservative establishment. Thus, in the 1790s, Francis Philips joined the Association for the Protection of Constitutional Order and Liberty Against Republicans and Levellers (APCOL), and in the 1800s Francis became president of the Manchester Pitt Club president, his brother John Leigh being listed as a member. Philp adds that John Leigh appeared as a signatory on most loyalist addresses and petitions drawn up in Manchester.

The picture of John Leigh Philips that emerges here is of a committed opponent of reform and an ardent supporter of the ministry – perhaps not the sort of man we would expect to purchase a supposedly anti-war painting. Yet it is important to note that in spite of his opposition to reformist causes Philips was also a committed member of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society. Through membership of this society Philips would have come into contact with a diverse group of Unitarians, Presbyterians, surgeons, and physicians, many of whom held progressive or radical views. Thomas Barnes, a leading Presbyterian minister, who
was a founder member of the Society and vice-president for 1781-84, was also active as a member of the Manchester Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade and chaired a meeting in 1789 to renew the application to parliament for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. Another prominent member, Thomas Cooper M.D. ‘the well-known materialist’, who served as vice-president from 1786-1791, journeyed to revolutionary France in 1792 as a representative of the Manchester Constitutional Society. Honorary members included the liberal reformers and Unitarians, Joseph Priestley and William Rathbone.

In the context of this radical-oriented grouping, dedicated to the pursuit of Truth and Liberty, Philips’s membership seems somewhat incongruous. Yet, in many ways, the question of whether or not Philips sympathized with his fellow members’ progressive political opinions is largely irrelevant. For Philips, notwithstanding his antipathy to reformist causes, maintained genial relations with a number of political opponents, from his liberal minded cousins Robert and George to his pro-Jacobin friend Thomas Cooper. It may well be that the category of the aesthetic provided such men with a politically neutral ground on which to meet, though ‘neutral’ barely disguises the very real sense in which the cultivation of taste was regarded as an important component of the manufacturer and merchantman’s rise to respectability.

But how did this society work in practice? In 1785, two years before his pro-reform ‘Propositions Respecting the Foundation of Civil Government’ was read to the Society, the radical Thomas Cooper delivered a paper entitled ‘Observations Among the Ancients on the Art of Painting’ in the course of which he credits Philips for having circulated among the members a selection of accurate copies of ‘the antique paintings discovered at Herculaneum’. Philips and Cooper’s engagement
with what David Solkin calls the ‘moral conversation’ of painting\textsuperscript{44} yields the following, significant detail:

[I]t was Aristides the Theban who principally excelled in this sublime art of painting: \textit{qui primus omnium animum pinxit et sensus hominis expressit, quæ vocant græci ëthê; item perturbationes. Durior paulo in coloribus. Hujus picture est oppido capto ad matris, morientis è vulnere, mamman adrepends infans: intelligiturque sensire matrem et timere ne emortuo lacte sanguinem lambat}. We shall not easily find a production of modern art superior to this …\textsuperscript{45}

The Latin quotation is taken from Pliny the Elder’s \textit{Natural History} and translates thus:

One of the contemporaries of Apelles was Aristides of Thebes; the first of all the painters to give full expression to the mind and passions of man, known to the Greeks as ëthê, as well as to the mental perturbations which we experience: he was somewhat harsh, however, in his colours. There is a picture by him of a Captured City, in which is represented an infant crawling toward the breast of its wounded mother, who, though at the point of death, has all the appearance of being aware of it, and of being in dread lest the child should suck blood in place of milk from her exhausted breast: this picture Alexander the Great ordered to be transferred to Pella, his native place.\textsuperscript{46}
Pliny’s account of Aristides’s ‘sublime’ painting certainly bears an uncanny resemblance to the composition of *The Dead Soldier* and it is possible that Philips conveyed the description to Wright. But whether or not the painter knew of the *Natural History*, he was certainly familiar with *The Country Justice* and, as a youth, appears to have known the poem’s author. In any case, irrespective of their contrasting political attitudes, the combination of Aristides’s êthê and Langhorne’s ‘beautiful thoughts’ provided Wright and the members of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society with a shocking yet ultimately compensatory view of the devastating effects of war on ordinary soldiers and their families. I would suggest that it was on this basis that Lieutenant-Colonel Philips may well have admired and understood the depiction of suffering in Wright’s painting.

---

1 John Wootton’s *Battle of Blenheim* (c.1740) and David Morier’s *An Incident in the Rebellion of 1745* (1746) may be regarded as distinguished exceptions to this rule.


6 From an extract published in Ashfield and de Bolla, p. 183.

7 *London Chronicle or Universal Evening Post*, Thursday, October 25, 1759; Issue 442.


10 The painting shown here, which is currently owned by the University of Michigan, is one of four extant versions – the others are held at Yale University, San Francisco Legion of Honor Museum and the Holburne Museum, Bath. The modelling of the soldier’s behind has been corrected in the other versions suggesting that the Michigan painting is most likely the original. I am grateful to Allan Reynolds for alerting me to this possibility.

11 For further details see R. Rosenblum, ‘Sources of Two Paintings by Joseph Wright of Derby’, *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 25 (1962), 135-6.


Quotation from *A Catalogue of the Valuable Collection of Paintings and Drawings, Prints and Etchings, Cabinet of Insects and c. (The Property of the Late John Philips, Esq.)* – sold at auction Manchester 31 October 1814, p. 40.

Extract from a letter sent by Hayley to his wife on 5 May, 1789. Hannah Wright cites the account in her memoir of her father. MS held at Derby Central Library.


*An Account of the Foundling Hospital in London, for the Maintenance and Education of Exposed and Deserted Young Children* (London, 1799), p. 34.

*Regulations for Managing the Hospital for the Maintenance and Education of Exposed and Deserted Young Children. By order of the Governors of the Said Hospital* (London, 1757), p. 11.

J. Hanway, *A Candid Historical Account of the Hospital for the Reception of Exposed and Deserted Young Children ...* (London, 1759), p. 25. In 1756, John Douglas, an opponent of Britain’s involvement in Germany, made the following caustic observation: ‘no good Reason can be assigned why the Introduction of
foreign Troops, and the Foundling Hospital by Vote of Parliament, should not go Hand in Hand, unless the former was intended to be the Means of increasing the Number of Candidates for the latter’. *A Serious Defence of Some Late Measures of the Administration; Particularly with Regard to the Introduction and Establishment of Foreign Troops* (London, 1756), p.18.


26 Dalton, pp.205-6.


30 *The Laws Respecting Women, As They Regard Their Natural Rights, or Their Connections and Conduct ... In Four Books* (London, 1777), p. 104.

31 Burn, *The History of the Poor Laws .....*, pp. 214-5.


38 Manuscripts and documents held at Derby Central Library

39 *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, 44 (1824), 624


41 Philp, p. 64.

42 From a handbill published in Manchester, 1776 held in the Huntington Library.

43 Philp, p. 63.

44 Solkin, p. 214.

