Napier and Clausewitz were two of many writers whose work compelled visions and revisions of the Napoleonic Wars during the nineteenth century. The immensity of those wars, and their spectacular progress, from the early years of defending the Revolution to the final years of resistance to French domination of Europe, meant that they appeared in novels by writers as various as Stendhal, Hugo, Thackeray and Tolstoy; while writing about war itself continued to exercise strategists, historians and moralists. This final chapter selects three writers as evidencing this interest. They have one thing in common: writing in the nineteenth century, as they did, they accepted the idea of war as that of the war of 1793 to 1815. It was this idea that had to change in the twentieth century, but which still underlies the value systems of much of modern warfare.

11.1 De Quincey on war

De Quincey’s essay ‘On War’ was published in 1854, although it may have appeared earlier in a periodical that has not been traced. It begins whimsically, taking serious matters lightly (as in the essay on murder); but the levity intensifies the seriousness, and the conclusion is both grander and more unexpected than might have been expected from the opening. ‘War’, he writes at the end, ‘has a deeper and more ineffable relation to hidden grandeurs in man than has yet been deciphered’ (392).¹

De Quincey’s reasons for supporting war, setting aside a superficial ‘Of all romances, this seems to me the most romantic’, are two-fold:

1st, a physical necessity arising out of man’s nature when combined with man’s situation; 2dly, a moral necessity connected with benefits of compensation, such as continually lurk in evils acknowledged to
be such – a necessity under which it becomes lawful to say that war ought to exist, as a balance to opposite tendencies of a still more evil character. War is the mother of wrong and spoliation: granted; but, like other scourges in the divine economy, war purifies and redeems itself when viewed as a counterforce to greater evils that could not otherwise be intercepted or addressed. (373)

If war were abolished, De Quincey goes on to argue, ‘it will revolve upon us in a worse shape’ (381), in unofficial and lawless conflict. He regards war, as Clausewitz does, as a continuation of policy by other means, with diplomacy as an accompaniment. Just as war has become less barbaric during the last two thousand years, ‘systematically improving in temper’, so too it has become less frequent (391), and if it were abolished, De Quincey argues, it would lead to something very much worse.

The final part of the essay takes the reader beyond this into what might be called ‘a high view of war’, in which it becomes associated with religion. De Quincey’s cue here is from Wordsworth’s Thanksgiving Odes and the verse about ‘Carnage’ which so offended Byron and Shelley. De Quincey calls it ‘a great truth’, both here and in a postscript:

Most heartily, and with my profoundest sympathy, do I go along with Wordsworth in his grand lyrical proclamation of a truth not less divine than it is mysterious, not less triumphant than it is sorrowful: viz. that among God’s holiest instruments for the elevation of human nature is “mutual slaughter” amongst men, – yes, that “Carnage is God’s daughter.” (394)

This does not seem to be about justice only, although De Quincey cites ‘Judas and Simon Maccabaeus in days of old, Gustavus Adolphus in modern days’ who were ‘fighting for the violated rights of conscience against perfidious despots and murdering oppressors’ (394). War is often justified by such a purpose:

To execute judgments of retribution upon outrages offered to human rights or to human dignity, to vindicate the sanctities of the altar and the sanctities of the hearth: these are the functions of human greatness which war has many times assumed, and many times faithfully discharged. (392)

War is good when it is a just war, but it is more than this. It is about the sublime, about something imperfectly grasped and understood, about what De Quincey calls ‘a transcendent atmosphere’: