

WATERLOO REMEMBERED

The Literary Reception of the Battle of Waterloo in the 19th Century

The recent festivities and the host of publications surrounding the events of the Great War have proven it once more: battles with their victories and defeats are and were a popular object of commemoration, official and otherwise. As scant or unreliable as historical evidence may be, leaders, nations, and artists have used and even instrumentalized such events for their symbolic value. Be it the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest (AD 9), celebrated as a victory of the heroic German people against Roman hegemony, the Battle of the Golden Spurs (1302), on which the Flemish people have founded a large part of their 'national' identity, the Battle of Agincourt (1415), which established English influence in France for many years, the infamous battles at Tannenberg, Passendale, Verdun, or even the Battle of Stalingrad (1942/43), often considered the turning point of WWII.¹ In general, however, for quite a long time commemorative monuments and events have tended to highlight almost exclusively the side of the conquerors or winners. It wasn't until the 1980s that attention gradually shifted towards the side of the losers or victims and battles generally became epistemological conundrums. One might argue, as W.G. Sebald does, that battles are the kinds of 'real' occurrences that allow for no absolute vantage point or complete view of the 'actual events' and are therefore always somehow unreal². The remembrance of the Battle of Waterloo is no exception to the rule: when writing about the lion of Waterloo as *lieu de mémoire*, Philippe Raxhon states, one should recognize that 'its symbolism is disrupted' and that 'a monument of the victors has rarely served the rhetoric of the defeated in the same way'³.

1. The list could obviously be extended almost ad infinitum. The nineteenth century saw many appraisals of this state of affairs, culminating in surveys such as Edward Shepherd Cressy: *The fifteen decisive battles of the world from Marathon to Waterloo*. New York, Burt 1851, which ends with the battle at Waterloo.

2. This is the claim of the titular character's history teacher, André Hilary, in *Austerlitz*, when he tries to narrate the battle of the same name: "Hilary could talk for hours about the second of December 1805, but none the less it was his opinion that he had to cut his accounts far too short, because, as he several times told us, it would take an endless length of time to describe the events of such a day properly, in some inconceivably complex form recording who had perished, who survived, and exactly where and how, or simply saying what the battlefield was like at nightfall, with the screams and groans of the wounded and dying. In the end all one could ever do was sum up the unknown factors in the ridiculous phrase, 'the fortunes of the battle swayed this way and that', or some similarly feeble and useless cliché." W.G. SEBALD: *Austerlitz*. Transl. by Anthea Bell, London, Penguin, 2002, 100-101. The point is further developed by Christina HÜNSCHE: *Textereignisse und Schlachtenbilder. Eine sebaldsche Poetik des Ereignisses*, Bielefeld, Aisthesis 2012. The inability to truly register such an equally complex and devastating 'event' can further be connected with its traumatic structure, as is argued in Philip Shaw's essay on Sebald and Stendhal in the present issue.

3. Philippe RAXHON, "De Leeuw van Waterloo. Een trefpunt van verleden, heden en toekomst" in: Jo TOLLEBEEK et al., *België, een parcours van herinnering*, Amsterdam, Bert Bakker, 2008, 188.



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Nevertheless, in all these cases, official commemorations kept the public interest going, sometimes immediately upon the return of the victorious troops, sometimes reviving memory centuries after the facts, and often they were accompanied, reinforced, or even prompted by artistic renditions – by Tacitus, Conscience, Shakespeare, and Hugo, to name but a few famous examples. Regardless of their views on the historic events and their meanings, these artists helped perpetuate the afterlives of these events, even if all that was remembered was a name – which may well be the case for Waterloo. The bicentenary of the battle on June 17th and 18th 2015 was bound to become a media-hyped mass event, and fits in nicely with the ‘memory boom’, a tendency in western culture that started some thirty years ago and has not stopped since then – witness the many commemorations of World War I. In the case of Waterloo, the book market was flooded with new volumes on Napoleon’s final stand, TV and radio specials abounded, the traditional reenactment saw thousands of extras from all over the world flock to the site, and as hors d’oeuvre, former *Cirque du Soleil* collaborator Luc Petit staged a sound and light show entitled *Inferno* on the battle field. The question arises whether this is just the last phase in the commemoration of a battle interesting only for the history books and now reduced to a Disney-like tourist attraction, or whether its success actually reflects a living, meaningful memory or symbolic capital. How many readers still recognize the intertextual nod by Uderzo and Goscinny towards Victor Hugo’s famous Waterloo-poem *L’expiation* (‘Waterloo! Waterloo! Morne plaine’), when one of the brave Gauls in *Astérix chez les Belges* makes a complaint about the regional cuisine by shouting: “Waterzooie! Waterzooie! Morne plat!”? On the other hand, the memory of the battle still seems able to hit a nerve: as a result of the bicentenary, the Royal Mint of Belgium wanted to release a memorial coin, but after French protest they withdrew from the plan.⁴

4. According to France, the battle “has a particular resonance in the collective consciousness that goes beyond a simple military conflict”. The Belgian finance minister said the new coins were

In short, as Adriaenssens rightly observes, the crucial question is whether “a winning combination of commemoration and serenity, of understanding without identification, of explanation without musealisation, of interaction without spectacle exists at all?”⁵ These and similar questions were raised by a number of recent publications,⁶ and they were also at the center of a number of academic events held in Belgium, close to the actual site of the battle. The afterlife of Waterloo in French-speaking literature and historiography was scrutinized at a conference entitled *La Chose de Waterloo*, with examples stretching from Stendhal to WWI.⁷ The present issue gathers a selection of papers presented at the two-day conference *A War of No Common Description*, also organized in June 2015, at which it was attempted to trace the earliest part of the battle’s trajectory from the actual, historically verifiable events of 1815 to its consecration within collective memory on the British Isles, in the Netherlands and in Germany. The articles collected here focus on the *earliest* reception of the Battle of Waterloo, a point in time when it was still part of what Aleida and Jan Assmann call communicative memory or when it was about to enter into cultural memory.⁸ As the Assmanns explain, while individual memory disappears with the individual, it may be preserved through oral communication in what they call communicative memory, usually stretching two to three generations within a familial context. It is then saved only through mediatic channels to become part of ‘cultural’ memory – a process that can, of course, be initiated alongside the first two forms⁹. Put differently: the reception of Waterloo discussed here returns to a time when Waterloo was not yet the *lieu de mémoire*, which, as Pierre Nora has demonstrated, was a concept that became prevalent when the direct connection between a community and its revered past is no longer present. The instances under scrutiny here all date from the first half of the 19th century and cover different regions (the British Isles (including Ireland), Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, the former United Kingdom of the Netherlands) and a wide array of genres,

not being released in a deliberate bid to anger France: “The goal is not to revive old quarrels. In a modern Europe, there are more important things to sort out [...] But there’s been no battle in recent history as important as Waterloo, or indeed one that captures the imagination in the same way.” For more information, see: “Belgium defies France as it mints € 2.50 coin to mark Battle of Waterloo”, in: *The Guardian*, 8.6.2015 [online] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/08/belgium-france-coin-battle-waterloo-euro-napoleon>

5. Lore ADRIAENSSENS, “Van trauma tot museum”, in: *Rekto:Verso*, 68 [online] <http://www.rektoverso.be/artikel/van-trauma-tot-museum>

6. See, for instance, Philip SHAW, *Waterloo and the Romantic Imagination*. Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002; Jeffrey N. COX, *Romanticism in the Shadow of War: Literary Culture in the Napoleonic War Years*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2014; Barbara BESSLICH, *Der deutsche Napoleon-Mythos. Literatur und Erinnerung (1800–1945)*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2007; and the forthcoming special issue on “Waterloo and British Romanticism” of *Studies in Romanticism* (Fall 2017), edited by Philip Shaw and Tom Toremans.

7. For some preliminary remarks on the topics discussed there, see Philippe RAXHON, “Waterloo: morts en masse et mémoire vivace”, in: *Mémoires en jeu / Memories at Stake. Revue interdisciplinaire et multiculturelle sur les enjeux de mémoire*. [online] <http://www.memoires-en-jeu.com/inprogress/waterloo-morts-en-masse-et-memoire-vivace>. The contributions to *La chose de Waterloo* were published earlier this year (*La Chose de Waterloo. Une bataille en littérature. Textes réunis et présentés par Damien Zanone*, special issue of *CRIN (Cahiers de Recherches des Instituts Néerlandais de Langue et Littérature française)* 63 (2017)).

8. The communicative and the cultural memory are both forms of collective memory, the more common term originally introduced by Maurice Halbwachs. See Jan ASSMANN, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, München, Beck 1992; Aleida ASSMANN, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, München, Beck 1999.

9. The distinction between individual, cultural and communicative memory roughly coincides with what others, such as the historian Serge Barcellini, have called respectively ‘the time of souvenir’, ‘the time of memory’ and ‘the time of history’. See M. L. STIG JØRENSSEN. D. VIEJO-ROSE. *War and cultural heritage. Biographies of place*. Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2015, 62.

both fictional (theatre, poetry, prose, music) and non-fictional (biography and programmes accompanying panoramas).

Often considered an epilogue to the Napoleonic era, the battle's geopolitical importance lies in the restoration of Europe's 'ancient' architecture at the Vienna Congress, a process which had already been set in motion after Napoleon's defeat at Leipzig. In many ways, the battle and the ensuing congress marked a new beginning. France was confined to its pre-revolutionary borders. Germany had gained a conscience of a national identity, but was left more or less with its old political structures. Great Britain assumed the role of sole truly global power for decades to come. Moreover, the end of the Napoleonic wars more or less coincided with important economic and technological revolutions – for some, it marked the end of a world in which heroism was still possible and ushered in an age of abstract economic and industrial interests. And finally, it was instrumental in the establishment of the national identities that would determine Europe's fate for the next century. As Joep Leerssen observes, the very advent of 19th-century nationalisms in Europe was made possible by the commemoration of historical events, when memorials and monuments as well as 'a national canon of key historical facts and figures was elaborated from older dynastic and regional sources.'¹⁰

Waterloo's symbolic importance as an epochal ceasura left its marks in the works of many artists, writers and historians in the course of the 19th century. It inspired a wide array of cultural artefacts, ranging from official functions, monuments, commemorative plaques and panoramas, to very diverse textual forms, including memoirs, historiographic accounts, poems, novels, and plays. Inversely, these artefacts helped create the very symbolic meaning of Waterloo. All of these artefacts can be considered *readings* of the event and the discourses spun around it, if one takes reading to be "the locus where form and history, literary value and cultural contexts, artistic aims and political interests interact".¹¹ Although these readings can be found in the cultures of all the European nations involved in the battle – a battle that assembled various European powers in a broad anti-French coalition –, they were usually bound to the national languages and cultures and did not really fuel 'transnational' exchanges. However, they did, in some cases, give rise to some modest reflections on 'European' identity, as can be seen from some of the contributions in the present volume. Texts written during this period of 'communicative memory' may give rise to several questions that were more crucial during this period than they are today. To what extent did the author keep a critical distance towards the events evoked in his work? What was the function of the signifier "Waterloo"? How did he or she conceive and represent the connection between the personal and the collective archive? These and other questions are addressed in the contributions to this special issue.

In the opening article, *Philip Shaw* looks for traces of trauma by juxtaposing Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma* (1839) and W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) as unorthodox representations of the Battle of Waterloo. Foregrounding a seam in European fiction that produced an "ironic, counter-hegemonic account of Water-

10. Joep LEERSSEN, *National Thought in Europe. A Cultural History*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam UP, 2006, 142-143.

11. Paul ARMSTRONG: "In Defense of Reading: Or, Why Reading Still Matters in a Contextualist Age", in *New Literary History* 42.1 (Winter 2011), 89.

loo”, Shaw’s analysis starts from Cathy Caruth’s account of trauma as a “history that can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence”. Shaw’s main claim is that Stendhal and Sebald share an interest in the ways in which traumatic memory disrupts narrative time and opens history to the return of the Real (Lacan). Central to Shaw’s reading of Sebald and Stendhal in terms of trauma is the disparity between their focus on the ghastly residue that remains when official, commemorative accounts of Waterloo have failed to capture the Real of war.

Sibylle Erle’s article pursues detailed analyses of the narrative techniques employed in the programmes accompanying the panoramas that were painted and constructed in Great Britain in the wake of the Battle, between 1816 and 1842. While panoramas aimed at reinforcing patriotic celebration, Erle argues that they ultimately failed to fully subsume carnage and suffering under national sacrifice. She provides an important supplement to the existing critical debate on the panoramas, which mainly focuses on the reception of the panorama itself and on the ways in which “it was conceived as well as experienced as ‘virtual reality’”. The pedagogic programmes accompanying the panoramas demonstrate a careful navigation between the event and its representation, as self-interrupting and self-reflexive narrators interfere with the master narrative about the victory. In the end, such interferences enhance an active involvement of the spectator, who is forced to critically assess the representations in front of her/him.

Raphael Ingelbien’s contribution looks into the 19th-century Irish attitude towards Wellington and Waterloo. Being of Irish descent, Wellington could be considered a British as well as an Irish hero. Looking at how the Irish have represented the memory of the Battle of Waterloo, Ingelbien distinguishes three formats. Military parades, for instance, didn’t go uncontested: some found it ‘un-Irish’ to celebrate the ultimate British moment of glory. Second, Irish novelists, such as W.H. Maxwell and Charles Lever, frequently used the Napoleonic wars as a subject or a backdrop for their stories. If they emphasized the Irish part played in the victory over the French, they did so not primarily to kindle Irish nationalism, but to inform the British readership. Ingelbien then goes on to analyse Irish travelogues on Waterloo. The memory of the battle became an instrument to underline the heterogeneous nature of British identity. Irish identity was being negotiated through a variety of representational modes, both material and discursive, in its relationship to British identity. The memory of Waterloo was, once again, instrumentalized at the service of national identity, but in this case that identity was clearly much more layered and complex than is commonly assumed.

The German reception of the Battle of Waterloo is put into the broader perspective of German representations of the Napoleonic era in *Norbert Otto Eke’s* article, which complements Barbara Beßlich’s comprehensive study *Der deutsche Napoleon-Mythos* (2005) and mainly addresses the reconfiguration of the Napoleon myth in Germany between 1815 and 1848. The image of Napoleon as a demon or scourge upon Germany was widespread during the so-called liberation wars and was shaped by poets as different as Kleist, Arndt, and Körner. It could still be found up to the 1840s in works by (then) conservative writers such as Arnim, Müllner, Schink, Grillparzer, Eichendorff, and Gotthelf. In the wake of the Vienna Congress and the resurgence of the local potentates, however, a much more positive view of Napoleon prevailed. The remodeling of Napoleon into a ‘great man’

is a gesture typical of the liberal poetics of prerevolutionary, *Vormärz* Germany. Bonaparte's greatness becomes apparent only against the mediocrity of post-Waterloo Germany. This 'relationism' is staged in different, and often ambiguous, ways by poets such as Grillparzer, Heine, and Grabbe.

Subsequently, three texts take a closer look at a number of very specific interpretations of the Waterloo event. *Peter Philipp Riedl* analyses reactions to Waterloo in the works of Görres, Goethe and Heine, in which a tone of resignation and the lamentation of the mediocrity and smallness of the world after Waterloo dominate. Taking into account that Waterloo occupies a much less central position in German collective memory than the victory over Napoleon at Leipzig in 1813 (which effectively ended French domination over the German lands), Riedl notes that Waterloo plays a much more modest, but also more complicated role. Joseph Görres depicts Bonaparte as the epitome of evil, even after Waterloo. His point is that hybris and abuse of power inevitably lead to disaster. Goethe, by contrast, considered Napoleon an exceptional human being and leader, yet he also saw Napoleon's return from Elba as a threat to peace, which was more important to him than his admiration of the French emperor. This, Riedl assumes, is probably the reason for his untypical collaboration in the design of a monument for field marshal Blücher in Rostock, inaugurated in 1819. While Schadow's monument makes abundant use of historical and mythological comparisons, Goethe's inscription adopts the basic antinomy of early defeat and final victory, but moves from the specific to the universal, transcending day-to-day politics. Finally, Riedl shows how Heinrich Heine contrasts the greatness of a highly fictionalized Napoleon with the petty bourgeois, apolitical society of post-Waterloo Europe, especially in Germany, where freedom of speech was seriously curtailed.

The contribution by *Michael Grus* zooms in on one very early, multimedial response to Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo: Clemens Brentano's satirical poem "Der Stern von der Katzbach à la belle Alliance", written in June 1815, also involving its musical adaptation and its illustration with an etching. The Waterloo-poem was printed separately twice, proving the importance its author attached to it. From contextual evidence one can derive that Brentano had a very clear idea of the poem's addressees, young noblemen and former soldiers who would recite and sing mainly patriotic poetry. For their purposes, a modest pamphlet containing the Waterloo poem was printed, in line with the war poems produced by Brentano's friend Achim von Arnim. The second edition was accompanied by an etching by Karl Josef Raabe, known mainly for his portrait of Goethe, and by sheet music probably composed by the author himself. The German name for the Battle of Waterloo, Belle-Alliance, was central to the poem, as it was to later texts of a similar patriotic nature, which, however, failed to be published for various reasons.

Jana Kittelmann's article focuses on a biography of Blücher by Karl August Varnhagen von Ense, published in 1826. Having met the Feldmarschall at the Vienna Congress, he got many of the anecdotes and stories surrounding the Battle of Waterloo (or Belle Alliance, as the Germans called it) from the horse's mouth. More generally, eyewitness reports play an important part in the biography. In keeping with the general appreciation at the time, Varnhagen depicted Blücher as a hero. Less interested in historical accuracy than in honouring the great man, Varnhagen still took care of inserting details that made the hero human and sympathetic,

as was also common at the time. Blücher is shown to be a rather simple-minded man, not the brilliant strategist, but the straightforward go-getter, which explains his widespread popularity in 19th-century Germany. The often inaccurate nature of Varnhagen's anecdotal and even ironic approach becomes especially apparent when compared to the much more matter-of-fact account of the events at Waterloo by his contemporary Anton von Prokesch-Osten. Prokesch does not favour one particular perspective; rather, he alternates between Blücher's, Wellington's and Bonaparte's point of view. Varnhagen, by contrast, clearly aims at the construction of a collective memory for Prussia, in which Blücher only figures as one hero in a long lineage.

The final section of this issue is dedicated to the reception of Waterloo in the Low Countries. *Janneke Weijermars'* imagological approach takes an international perspective. Contrary to what could be said for the British Isles or the German lands, Dutch literature could not use Waterloo to represent a sense of national consciousness unambiguously. This may be due to the modest size and peripheral position of the United Netherlands. Weijermars therefore investigates the relationship between national and European identities in the Waterloo literature of the Low Countries up to the First World War. The corpus she considers consists of approximately 200 texts written during the 19th century in what is now the Netherlands and Flanders. The article first examines how recollections of Waterloo have forged the construction of a self-image in the Low Countries, paying specific attention to the difference in image building between the Northern and the Southern Netherlands. Second, it explores how this national identity is related to the cultural connotations, associations and representations of 'Europe' and notions of 'European' identity in Dutch Waterloo literature. Such an international view reinforces the assumption that the Low Countries were more receptive to perspectives other than their regional or national remembrance of the battle. The number of references to the Allied troops in the original Dutch and Flemish Waterloo literature indicates a clear awareness that the Low Countries could have never won Waterloo without the help of other European nations.

The article by *Ton van Kalmthout* looks at theatrical representations of Waterloo in the Low Countries. At first glance, it would appear that Dutch theatre paid very little attention to the battle. Few dramatic texts remain that can be directly linked to it, but there were undoubtedly more Waterloo-inspired plays than those that have survived. Indeed, van Kalmthout shows how Dutch-language theatre in the period prior to the First World War did in fact help to cultivate the memory of Waterloo. The author focuses on Dutch-language plays that expressly took Waterloo as their subject, in order to discover by whom and in what ways 19th-century Dutch and Flemish audiences were brought face to face with the final defeat of Napoleon. The production of texts gained momentum around the 50th anniversary of the battle. Prior to that, the battle was deemed a less appropriate subject for the stage, since the nation was still recovering from the collective trauma that was Waterloo. If the topic of Waterloo did occur on stage, van Kalmthout concludes, it was by amateur theatrical groups ('Rederijkers'), who used very traditional, even stereotypical verse forms with mainly didactic aims, trying to instill nationalist feelings in their audiences by depicting the wounded prince of Orange on the battlefield.

Finally, *Adelheid Ceulemans* focuses on two Waterloo poems by Antwerp author Theodoor Van Ryswyck (1811-1849). Both poems reproduce the cultural-nationalistic system of norms prevalent in many 19th-century Flemish literary texts. Van Ryswyck wrote these poems at a time when the Belgian nation was still young; the country had only separated from the Netherlands in 1830. Nation-building is therefore an important aim for this kind of literature: the poet is trying to help construct a Flemish-Belgian identity through his poetry. These poems illustrate that Van Ryswyck could be seen as an Orangist, a partisan of the Dutch rule. On the one hand, then, the identity he proposed in these texts refers to his hometown of Antwerp, but on the other it attempts to position itself in an international context by taking an anti-French and Orangist stance.

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