

LYING EPITAPHS: *VANITY FAIR*, WATERLOO, AND THE CULT OF THE DEAD

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PYRAMIDE – Ouvrage inutile.
—Gustave Flaubert

I. Narrative Holes, Bullet Holes

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WATERLOO episode in *Vanity Fair* remains somewhat obscure. Early reviewers of the novel either ignored it or suggested its downright insignificance: “The battle of Waterloo, it is true, is introduced; but as far as regards the story, it brings about only one death, and one bankruptcy, which might either of them have happened in a hundred of other ways” (Rigby 79). Furthermore, when compared to Stendhal’s *La chartreuse de Parme* and Hugo’s *Les misérables*, two novels where a report of the battle is at least attempted, *Vanity Fair* looks exceptional.¹ The novel’s mimetic elusiveness vis-à-vis the battle has been a source of puzzle and the object of some critical contention. In line with John Carey, who argued that “*Vanity Fair* is built round a thunderous void” (189), John Sutherland suggested that “Thackeray’s battlefield reticence” impinged on the novel’s “historical fabric” producing “gaping, but evidently carefully placed, holes” (15), the larger being (no pun intended) Waterloo. Some critics explained away this omission by invoking Thackeray’s anti-heroic restraint, a position best expressed by Tolstoy: “For an historian considering the achievement of a certain aim, there are heroes; for the artist treating of man’s relation to all sides of life there cannot and should not be heroes, but there should be men” (1309).² Other readers blamed the silencing effect of an elegiac trauma – an “agony of glory,” in Coleridge’s terms – not uncommonly affecting the winning side in a violent conflict.³ One could also adduce reasons of epistemological honesty, in line with Tolstoy’s blunt assertion that “in every description of a battle there is a necessary lie” (1310).

But these explanations are blurred by intimations of deeper ideological irony, for Thackeray’s reticence may well harbor a parody of anti-Tory reserve.⁴ What no amount of irony can defeat is the suspicion that Waterloo stands in the novel for History as “the experience of Necessity,” and that as such it forestalls “its thematization or reification as a mere object of representation” (Jameson 102).⁵ In this view, the battle’s resistance to mimesis works as an index to its centrality in the novel’s overall design.⁶ Thackeray’s treatment of the Waterloo material confirms Charlotte Brontë’s observation that he “only hints at the

dead men's bones . . . *but*, his hint is more vivid than other men's elaborate explanations" (52). Thackeray's neoclassical instinct, unswervingly committed to decorum, drew him to expostulate along similar lines: "Pathos I hold should be very occasional indeed in humorous works and indicated rather than expressed or expressed very rarely" ("Letter to Robert Bell" 68). Yet, we fear, in *Vanity Fair* the indication overspilled into expression.

Indeed, despite its descriptive foreclosure, the truncated Waterloo-episode plays a pivotal role in the novel, structurally, thematically, and symbolically.⁷ It closes in a famous understated climax, a brutal *peripeteia* turning on a bullet hole – "Darkness came down on the field and city: and Amelia was praying for George, who was lying on his face, dead, with a bullet through his heart" (406; ch. 32) – placed at the exact center of the text, at the end of chapter 32 in a novel with 65 chapters. This closing is, in Ruskin's apt terms, a "hammer-stroke" (87) resonating in all possible directions. From a structural standpoint, Waterloo is the blind locus where various narrative lines, notably George's erotic intrigue and Amelia's mock-epic campaign, are made to converge and ultimately vanish. Evidence of George's intended infidelity, "The Letter before Waterloo," is momentarily produced in the final chapter, thus sanctioning the one twist, Amelia's turning to Dobbin, that brings the plot to rest. No important character in the novel remains unchanged after Waterloo. A complex web of secrecy and shame, concocted at the battle's eve, mars the subsequent trajectory of the puppets. The chiasmus outlined by their lives, in the forms of *amor militiae* and *militia amoris*, is abruptly interrupted by a death, George's, almost coincidental with the inception of two children that will in turn shape the new domestic fate of the characters involved. Before Waterloo, the narrator had gone to great lengths to show how ridiculously the imperatives of chronological coincidence placed the petty incidents in the lives of these Londoners alongside the major events in European history. After Waterloo, this history has suddenly become the most crucial ingredient in their lives. It is worth noting that *Vanity Fair* radically differs from *Barry Lyndon*, *Henry Esmond*, and *The Virginians* — narratives strongly influenced by Scott — in that public history is reduced to a minimum, and yet to that painful minimum that hurts by inscribing itself as a hole.⁸

That Thackeray should resort to modes of symbolic indirection in order to register the presence of History in private life is not surprising. He had little interest in the inner workings of historical change, whether at home or abroad. In all of his novels where it is present, the arch-historical phenomenon of war appears as a given without retrievable cause. It is simply there, gross and inexorable, just to remind us that, as Becky urged, "revenge may be wicked, but it's natural" (15). Besides, very little self-deceit is needed to take part in a war: after Fabrice in *La chartreuse de Parme*, Barry Lyndon, George Osborne, and Dobbin — all three readers of "romantic books" (*Vanity Fair* 56) — are pricked by dreams of inflated heroism. In his writings as amateurish historian, Thackeray cynically tended to boil down historical violence to inescapable circularity.⁹ Military history (a redundant phrase for Thackeray) could only be accounted for in two possible ways, the panegyric and the satire, neither of which afforded the realistic truth Thackeray yearned for.¹⁰ Still, as an admirer of Cervantes and Fielding he was drawn to these modes of mock-epic indirection. *Vanity Fair* abounds in metafictional provisos denouncing its stylistic inability to offer a heroic rendering of its action. The opposite temptation, satire, is less skillfully avoided, for the narrator indulges in heavily burlesque irony, especially in his protracted description of Amelia and Becky's erotic campaign. The tone he pursues, one of unmediated truth, dominates *The History of Pendennis* rather than the earlier *Vanity Fair*, probably because the rash contingency of war

present in his Waterloo novel sat rather uneasily with the *via media* of realism. Thackeray famously stated in his preface to *Pendennis* that “if truth is not always pleasant, at any rate truth is best.” And yet, one must insist, Waterloo’s unpleasant truth had been very obliquely conveyed, nearly obliterated, in his earlier novel.

II. Towards a Poetics of Commemoration

IN THIS ESSAY, SUCH OBLIQUITY is read as an index of higher significance. Three major hypotheses make up its argumentative thrust. First, that Waterloo is material to the novel’s meaning. Second, that George Osborne, dead at Waterloo, is the banished hero of the novel without a hero. And third, that the rhetorical mode that best encapsulates the novel’s significance is the epitaph. If, as I will contend, Thackeray was more concerned in *Vanity Fair* with the cultural economy of death than it has been hitherto admitted, the novel can be then read as a true(r) epitaph for a constellation of human events plagued by epigraphic deception. This reading decidedly harbors a fresh focus on genre. Thus, the fragmentary condition of this novel – conceived by its author as a collection of *pen and pencil sketches* and received invariably as not quite a novel – may be an effect of its exposure to ideological perforation.¹¹ It is as if the writing tried at recursive nodal points to account for a something – a hole, a void – which only admitted a hazy and truncated presentation.¹² The hole, in this reading, is Waterloo, “that which is re-remembered, re-written, and above all re- (and mis-) represented” (Hammond 36). Such misrepresentation is registered by three narrative modes – the *snob paper*, the *tour sketch* and the *private epistle* – which arguably underpin the novel’s uncertain structure. In my view, these three modes have a substantial bearing on the novel’s composition: first, because two of them, the tour sketch and the snob paper, stand out as serious candidates for the novel’s conjectural origin; second, because they produce three narrative courses which, operating as quasi-autonomous textual threads, furnish, through their critical intersections, a strong sense of symbolic cohesion; and third, because these three courses meet in a shared attempt to replenish the novel’s central void: Waterloo as bullet hole and cenotaph. All but the third (the private epistle) had been already tried by Thackeray as large-scale compositional devices. All three are made to turn on the Waterloo episode, even as they register mimetic insufficiency regarding its truth. In Thackeray’s hands, moreover, all three are inherently epitaphial, in that they seek to overwrite, simultaneously to account for and conceal, a void.

Through this tangled and largely impromptu compositional strategy, *Vanity Fair* emerges as staging an ironic and elegiac meditation on the powers of commemoration. In its relentless undoing of epigraphic inscription, whether tombstones or old letters, the novel aims to scrutinize the effectiveness of cultural memory.¹³ The meditation is elegiac insofar as it is concerned with a dead past, and it is ironic because it pits the authenticity of an old emotion against its inability to inhabit the present. Inasmuch as inscriptions (paintings, letters, tombstones) endeavor to keep an emotion alive throughout a time that is intent on changing everything else, time itself becomes the arch-ironist. Few things more ironic, then, than the written perpetuation of an emotion once the emotion is spent. As the narrator in Gaskell’s *Cranford* notes, “I never knew what sad work the reading of old letters was. . .” (42). In them, writing freezes into a reminder of corrupted feelings. For Thackeray this caveat obtained both in the high-political sphere of military monuments and in the low-political circle of domestic mementos: neither the Waterloo memorials erected by the British

authorities nor the letters written by the London puppets succeed in passing the test of time. They are just *lying epitaphs*:

Have you ever had a difference with a dear friend? How his letters, written in the period of love and confidence, sicken and rebuke you! What a dreary mourning it is to dwell upon those vehement protests of dead affection! What *lying epitaphs* they make over the corpse of love! What dark, cruel comments upon Life and Vanities! (440; ch. 35; emphasis added)¹⁴

In the novel's first chapter, the narrator had already cautioned that "schoolmistresses' letters are to be trusted no more nor less than churchyard epitaphs" (6). The present essay explores the relevance of this rhetorical mode, the *lying epitaph*, for an interpretation of *Vanity Fair* which underscores the ideological function of cultural memory. This exploration involves structural considerations, since it focuses on the parallel role of the three discursive modes mentioned above. Through this detour I hope to render clearer the significance of the Waterloo episode in the novel. But this exploration must be premised on genealogical grounds, as Thackeray was not the first novelist to dispute the "politics and poetics of commemoration" (Shaw 179). Walter Scott, putative father of historical fiction, stands out as precursor in this act of iconoclastic interrogation.

III. Old and New Mortality

SCOTT'S *OLD MORTALITY* OPENS with the scene of a man "engaged in his daily task of cleaning and repairing the ornaments and epitaphs" upon the tombs at the churchyard of Dunnottar (15). This man, known as Old Mortality, has devoted his life to the sepulchral reconstruction of the tombs of the Cameronians who died during the 1679 Bothwell-Bridge rebellion. His purpose, grafted on solid ideological convictions, is to prevent the defacement of true epitaphs, truer at least than the funeral monument to Archbishop Sharp, the "official" victim of this violent episode.¹⁵ The novel *Old Mortality* emerges then as an elegiac reinstatement, an expanded epitaph, thus aping at narrative scale what the narrator meticulously performs. Since only the great were entitled to heroic monumentalization, the democratic gesture of granting dignified retrospective narration to all the past dead could be seen indeed as implicitly energizing the new novelistic program founded by Scott. To equate a novel with a tombstone may seem farfetched. Yet, Samuel Johnson had implicitly leveled them when suggesting that "to afford a subject for heroic poems is the privilege of very few, but every man may expect to be recorded in an epitaph" (96).¹⁶

In this enlarged sense, *Vanity Fair* too is an epitaph. More specifically, it is Thackeray's protracted epitaph to George Osborne, military snob, killed at Waterloo. This hypothesis can be validated by exploring the connection between *Old Mortality* and *Vanity Fair*, a relation seldom noted but already visible in their allegorical titles.¹⁷ Both novels share a concern with the (in)significance of death and a distrust of the vanity of immortality. They seek to strip death down to its naked brutality. Scott never declared that the deaths of the Covenanters and their Royalist enemies had been *vain* in the light of the new dispensation of liberty, common sense, and compromise that characterized post-Union Regency society. The intensity of his narrative resurrection betrays a conciliatory sympathy not exempt of legitimization, even of killing and of dying. It is also unlikely that Scott, anything but an anarchist, would have rebuffed the *vanity* of Archbishop Sharp's monumentalized death. And yet, *Old Mortality*

rehearses an apology for “peace and indemnity” (316) whose bottom line is that multiple deaths may have been in vain.

One particular corpse haunts Scott’s narrative as a reminder of death’s inalienable truth. It is the dead body of the Royalist Sergeant Bothwell, with “his een . . . open and his brow bent, and his teeth clenched together. . .” (249). This cadaverous irruption occurs at the opening of chapter 23, halfway through the novel, and is followed by an examination of his “warlike spoils,” among which is a pocketbook full of papers of diverse nature, memorandums of tavern bills, commissions, certificates, and even an account of his genealogy and a list of family possessions. But the most interesting is “a secret pocket of the book, which Morton did not discover without some trouble, [with] one or two letters, written in a beautiful female hand.” The words of affection were barely readable, but a proviso in the envelope proudly proclaims the unimportance of this erosion: “It matters not. I have them by heart” (251). This passage echoes one at the novel’s beginning where Old Mortality recites the dead Covenanters’ epitaph, “which he remembered by heart” (15). The dialectic between internal memory and external monument is inherently complex, since at stake is the perpetuation of a truth whose solid configuration is contingent on inscribing processes. Reaching such truth involves, at any rate, an act of reading, and Morton plunges into “a copy of verses” found among the letters. The lines reveal the impassioned emotions of a once noble soul. The contrast between these spent feelings and the present corpse gives way to a meditation on the deciduousness of passion: “Alas! what are we, said Morton, ‘that our best and most praiseworthy feelings can be thus debased and depraved. . . . Our resolutions, our passions, are like the waves of the sea” (252). When Burley, the Cameronian leader, inspects in turn these written spoils, his angry reaction, which inverts Morton’s moralizing, is only detained by the allegorical locus of *Vanity Fair*:

“I little thought,” he said, “when, by the blessing of God, I passed my sword three times through the body of that arch tool of cruelty and persecution, that a character so desperate and so dangerous could have stooped to an art as trifling as it is profane. But I see that Satan can blend the most different qualities in his well-beloved and chosen agents, and that the same hand which can wield a club or a slaughter-weapon against the godly in the valley of destruction, can touch a tinkling lute, or a gittern, to soothe the ears of the dancing daughters of perdition in their *Vanity Fair*.” (253)

This crucial passage seals the transit from *Old Mortality* to *Vanity Fair*. The Bunyanesque motif helps to sustain an allegorical figure urged by both novels, the emblem of the warrior-beau, a creature that Waterloo mythography was bound to extol.¹⁸ They also partake of a resulting moral, one that certainly lies beyond Bunyan’s explicit sermonizing: that the most lasting of human foibles is inconstancy of feeling, disloyalty to an earlier self, a moral blemish that old written mementos rashly advertise. The Bothwell episode in *Old Mortality* attests to this ironic lesson. In *Vanity Fair*, it is Osborne’s letter to Becky that ironically commemorates the paradox of emotional treason. The parallels between *Old Mortality* and *Vanity Fair* are best formulated in terms of a shared subplot: a dandified hero exits the plot, dead, midway through the story, across the epic gate of a historical battle and leaves behind an epitaph-letter revealing the magnitude of his erotic intrigue. Both novels, in turn, take the form of a dubious epitaph to wasted heroism.

IV. *The Snob Paper*

CHAPTERS 9 AND 10 OF *THE BOOK of Snobs*, published as weekly installments in 1846 and dedicated to Military Snobs, should figure prominently in the textual prehistory of *Vanity Fair*. Chapter 9 opens with a critique of the extension of the deferential principle based on rank to military hierarchies, and moves on to illustrate this injustice by introducing the character of “Lieutenant-General the Honourable Sir George Grandby Tufto, K.C.B., K.T.S., K.H., K.S.V. &c. &c. . . . and a most thorough Snob” (*The Book of Snobs* 335). This man, who dresses in old age like “an outrageously young man,” is fit for no other profession than that of

a good and gallant officer, and privately for riding races, drinking port, fighting duels, and seducing women. . . . About Waterloo Place, of afternoons, you may see him tottering in his varnished boots, and leering under the bonnets of the women who pass by. When he dies of apoplexy, the *Times* will have a quarter of a column about his services and battles – four lines of print will be wanted to describe his titles and others alone – and the earth will cover one of the wickedest and dullest old wretches that ever strutted over it. (336)

Thackeray brings here together a number of elements that will prove decisive in *Vanity Fair*: a critique of snobbery, an elegy to bygone idleness, a historical evocation of English officers at a place commemorating Waterloo, and an ironic glance at the absurdity of obituaries. Further, General Tufto is too a character in *Vanity Fair*. At Brussels, during the days preceding the battle, he becomes the object of Becky’s coquettish attentions. His eager answer to them meets however an unexpected obstacle in the figure of George Osborne, decidedly an “Amateur-Military Snob” (*The Book of Snobs*) with neither military experience nor pedigree, and yet capable of gaining Becky’s momentary favor: “Rebecca saw that [the General’s] disengaged eye was working round in her direction, and shooting out bloodshot glances at her and George” (*Vanity Fair* 351; ch. 29). This admonitory glance is revealing, since it comes from a figure of authority – a virtual surrogate father for disinherited George – eerily foreshadowing his own future persona. George Tufto is a displaced and distorted image of George Osborne, a figure of the Freudian uncanny, casting an ironic and deadly shadow on this vain “woman-killer,” “lost in pompous admiration of his own irresistible powers of pleasing” (354, 351; ch. 29).¹⁹ A few hours later, the young officer will be dead, and “the earth will cover” him. The puppetmaster will then have to arrange for the funeral proceedings and search for something more than “a quarter of a column about his services and battles.”

Accessing the novel through the snob paper allows us to place George Osborne, military snob (his surname reads like a cryptogram of *hero snob*) and *revenant* of the loyalist Sergeant Bothwell, at the very center of *Vanity Fair*. And yet his centrality, like that of the Waterloo episode, has seldom been noted by critics. Described by Trollope as a “poor kind of fellow” (105), he is hardly mentioned in the early reviews of the novel, and features very scantily in modern Thackeray criticism.²⁰ One remarkable exception is a recent article by Sarah Rose Cole where a great deal of ideological ambivalence in Thackeray’s vision of the effeminate snob is successfully restored.²¹ Building on previous criticism, Gordon Ray had already implied that the subtitle to the snob papers, “By One of Themselves,” could well be taken at face value, thus suggesting that his critique was informed by anxious admiration (Ray 337). Indeed, *Vanity Fair* reads as a nostalgic elegy on the lost glamour of the Regency Period, a

sort of Jazz Age *avant la lettre* whose crack-up was effectively sealed at Waterloo, and whose finest creature is George Osborne, “the possessor of every perfection, . . . the handsomest, the bravest, the most active, the cleverest, the most generous of created boys” (56; ch. 5), and yet, rather insidiously, *a boy falling out of the sky*. George, Thackeray’s soundest try at the military dandy, is moreover a refracted, truncated and domesticated counter-image of the Duke of Wellington. In constructing this character, Thackeray was making his particular contribution to the literary type of the Regency gentleman, inaugurated by Bulwer’s *Pelham* (1828) and followed closely by Gore’s *Cecil* (1841), the coxcomb who “knows Brummell in his primer, fights at Waterloo, and goes on the grand tour with Byron.”²² George certainly embodies something of the lost Regency spirit, “its love of theatricality and display, its curious amalgam of melancholy and exuberance” (Shaw 2). It may not be outlandish to insinuate, then, that Thackeray, aware that the integrity of the nation-state was conditional on its capacity to resist “the feminized lassitude of perpetual peace” and thus renounce the “endless erotic play” of the pleasure principle, was originally driven to fabricate an elegy to this fallen warrior-beau.²³ Vain, idle, beautiful, Narcissus-like, and yet disinherited son to a merchant with frustrated aspirations to gentility, this creature agglutinates the kind of contradictory ideological energy that troubled Thackeray’s creative dreams. But his importance in the novel is not restricted to his furnishing Thackeray a fully aestheticized ideologeme fusing historical nostalgia and status inconsistency. As mentioned above, George dwells at the center of the ball the plot will eventually curl into, and he provides the key (a letter) for its *dénouement*. Furthermore, he is the only character that manages to antagonize Becky.²⁴ Only George succeeds in bringing Becky’s contradictions fully into the open. When they engage in conversation it is either to flirt or to subject one another to ruthless social deconstruction. Their meetings are exasperating tests of pride ushering in either frustrated erotic elation or moral embarrassment. Their antagonism, Cole argues, is also shaped by a gender reversal betraying deeper geopolitical implications: while George is the effeminate son of a “true British merchant” (25; ch. 3) Becky, daughter to a French opera singer, is a female Napoleon.²⁵ Insofar as they are “the most determined social climbers in *Vanity Fair*” (Cole 162), they become incompatible. No wonder why Thackeray, increasingly pleased with the “flexible [. . .] joints” (2; “Before the Curtain”) of his Becky Puppet, decided to scribble *exit snob* in the margin of his “little drama.” A terrible hammer-stroke, indeed, but the banished hero refused to leave. He reappears in the memories of all the major characters, and more poignantly, in the figure of his son, little Georgy, riding a pony in the Park (chapter 37), a scene twice adumbrated, first by the family picture where “George was on a pony” (282; ch. 24) and second by Captain Rag, Sporting Military Snob, riding “in the Park, mounted on a clever well-bred Pony” (*The Book of Snobs* 337). Thackeray approached George’s elegy in a variety of incomplete ways. The second half of the novel bears witness to this deferred attempt, and so does the ironic closing of his second paper on military snobs, where the boy George is presciently masked as “dear little Arthur” heading in his father’s arms towards military glory and pictorial immortality.²⁶

George Osborne epitomizes what Edmund Burke, mourning the age of chivalry, described as “the unbought grace of life, the cheap defence of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprise. . .” (170). The ambivalence of Thackeray’s ironic elegy is truly disturbing, and the fact that his funeral homage to the Byronic dandy could have been inspired in a passage of Carlyle’s lectures on heroism renders this issue even more vexing.²⁷ In his lecture on Cromwell, Carlyle refers in passing “to vain unbelieving Cavaliers,

worshipping not God but their own ‘love-locks,’ frivolities and formalities, living quite apart from contemplations of God, living *without* God in the world. . .” (245). One is led to recall the mirror-gazing George that opens chapter 13, as well as Thackeray’s description of the novel in a letter to his mother as staging “a set of people living without God in the world.”²⁸ To be sure, no Puritan angst spurs Thackeray’s anti-dandyism, but he is unwittingly drawn to remonstrate, with Scott, that “the pleasures of this world, under whatever name disguised, are vanity, and its grandeur and power are a snare” (*Old Mortality* 253).

V. *The Tour Sketch*

IN 1808 WILLIAM WOOD published *An Essay on National and Sepulchral Monuments* where he defended the erection of a giant pyramid near London in order to stimulate heroism at the critical juncture of the war against France. In Wood’s view, his mercantilist countrymen had not risen to the occasion, and “the ordinary feelings of men are not adequate to the present crisis.” The historian Reinhart Koselleck has drawn attention to this important document which stands out as the “theoretical justification” of the many large memorials of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

To extricate the population from its lethargy and egoism, the casualties of war would need to be transported into an earthly immortality so as to secure “unceasing fame, long duration” for them. The only means for doing so would be a gigantic memorial serving “to delight, astonish, elevate or sway the minds of others through the medium of their senses.” The costs incurred in constructing such a memorial would be minuscule when measured against the benefits expected: only three days of war outlay would be required to secure, by way of the memorial, a lasting motivation for heroic death. (294)

The memorial was never built, but history gave this insane project a second and more legitimate chance. As Koselleck explains, after Waterloo, “a pyramid was erected, together with British lions, by the citizens of Liège. Today, it is still a tourist destination for thousands upon thousands of visitors” (294). In fact, a few weeks after the battle the site had already become a tourist destination of sorts.²⁹ A blending of, on the one hand, progressive awareness of modern historicity and, on the other, military antiquarian fascination fueled by Tory chauvinism, contributed to fetishize the site, and, what is more important, to commodify its stolen remains. Battle spoils became marketable objects for collectors. Successive waves of English nationalism kept alive this cultural investment.³⁰ What needs to be stressed, however, is that irrespective of Thackeray’s inner motivation, *Vanity Fair* is also a belated memento of the fight, for in it two modern devices of community-formation, the novel and the cenotaph to the unknown soldier, are made to converge.³¹ Thus Thackeray’s novel emerges as a cenotaph-book capitalizing willy-nilly on a human tragedy symbolically sublimated into national *lieu de mémoire*.³² Thackeray was aware that the Waterloo-epitaph had become an elegiac subgenre in its own right. Influential writers like Scott, Southey, Wordsworth, and Byron had toured the battlefield and registered the occasion. Walter Scott composed *The Field of Waterloo*, a poetic piece imbued in epic grandeur, during his brief tour of France and the Netherlands which he began in the summer of 1815. But apart from an excuse for patriotic sublimation, the battlefield afforded him unexpected pleasures. According to Lockhart, Scott was compulsively driven to pick through the material – especially

textual – remains of the French soldiers: “illegible songs, scattered sheets of military music, epistles. . .” (qtd. in Shaw 45–46). Small wonder, then, that these fragments reappear as the unlikely cargo of Sergeant Bothwell’s corpse: *Old Mortality* was published only one year after this tour.³³ Robert Southey’s visit to the battlefield is documented in two related texts, the *Journal of a Tour in the Netherlands in the Autumn of 1815* and *The Poet’s Pilgrimage to Waterloo*, both of which engage in a traumatic effort to overcome and reduce to a mythical totality the metonymic fragmentation of the site. His final “totalizing vision” allows the pilgrim to “address the sacred underpinnings of individual and national identity” (Shaw 112).

Prompted perhaps by contemporary parliamentary debate about the raising of a national war monument in memory of Waterloo, William Wordsworth wrote in February 1816 a sonnet “Occasioned by the Battle of Waterloo,” whose last six lines are “intended for an inscription.”³⁴ A determined monument to the heroism of the “intrepid sons of Albion,” the sonnet however recoils from mimetic ambition by merely designating “the event” (similarly, Burke could only refer to the French Revolution as “the events”). Four years later, Wordsworth visited the battlefield. The sonnet, “After Visiting the Field of Waterloo” is included in his *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent, 1820*. Foreclosure of the event is more explicit in this second epitaphial sketch. What hampers cultural sublimation – glory-bestowing gods have vanished and monuments “soon must disappear” – is not only a new skepticism fostered during the intervening years, but also the new testimonial dimension built into the poem. Wordsworth is now a tourist at Waterloo, painfully aware of the “dread local recompence,” feeling “as men should feel.” The truth of the event is, now, simply terrifying: “With such vast hoards of hidden carnage near,/And horror breathing from the silent ground!” (4. 10, 13, 14–15). And, in Wordsworth’s own terms, if epitaphial reckoning does not manage to counterbalance “the impression and sense of death,” then “a hollowness would pervade the whole system of things” (“Essay Upon Epitaphs” 729). Thus elegiac inflation gives way to a resigned recognition of gaps, holes and hollowness.

The strongly ambivalent impact of Byron’s visit to Waterloo in 1816 made its way into Canto III of *Childe Harold*. Byron, who worshipped Napoleon and respected the reformist spirit of the French Revolution, found little to recommend in the historical recollection. But as befits the tourist at a *lieu de mémoire*, he was bound to obey the injunction, *sta viator*: “Stop! – for thy tread is on an Empire’s dust!/An Earthquake’s spoil is sepulchred below!” Then follows a rhetorical questioning – “Is the spot mark’d with no colossal bust?/Nor column trophied for triumphal show?” – resolved in testimonial gratification: “None; but the moral’s truth tells simpler so,/As the ground was before, thus let it be” (3. 17. 1–6). After three reflective stanzas where the voice searchingly queries the moral of the place, the poem narrates the famous events spanning from the Brussels ball through the confusion and mourning that followed the battle. There is much in stanzas 21–28 that will reverberate in chapters 29–32 of *Vanity Fair*. The most remarkable parallel is the ironic contradiction opposing the “voluptuous swell” of “fair women and brave men” at the great ball to the tragic trepidation pushing young men to death, one that Magdalene De Lancey had expressed with striking economy: “Many of the officers danced, and then marched in the morning.”³⁵ In the closing line of stanza 23, the description of the Duke of Brunswick’s death achieves an economy – “He rush’d into the field, and, foremost fighting, fell” (207) – only matched by Thackeray’s memorable fadeout in George “lying on his face, dead, with a bullet through his heart.” But *Childe Harold* held further attractions to the author-to-be of *Vanity Fair*. Stanzas

29 and 30 are a panegyric to “young, gallant Howard,” Byron’s cousin, killed at Waterloo.³⁶ The note Byron himself attached to these lines is worth quoting in full:

The place where Major Howard fell was not far from two tall and solitary trees (there was a third cut down, or shivered in the battle) which stand a few yards from each other at a pathway’s side. – Beneath these he died and was buried. The body has since been removed to England. A small hollow for the present marks where it lay, but will probably soon be effaced; the plough has been upon it, and the grain is. (139)

The effacement of the “hollow” – once a tomb, now a cenotaph – by the regularity of nature is an elegiac lesson fraught with anti-heroic echoes that can hardly be dismissed. It is not unlikely that Thackeray retained it, as he did the counter-ideological nihilism of Wordsworth. Nor is it improbable that he was moved to imitation by these two radical interventions in the archival repository of Waterloo memory, two disjunctive epitaphial testimonies written in overt opposition to Scott’s and Southey’s organic commemorations.

Thackeray, who grew up among people “who never tired of hearing and recounting the history of that famous action” (*Vanity Fair* 405) and who engaged in violent discussion with Charles Lever apropos the battle, decided to visit the site.³⁷ The description of this visit, titled “Waterloo,” is the last of the *Little Travels and Road-Side Sketches* published by Thackeray’s heteronym Titmarsh in *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1845, the year he began serious work on *Vanity Fair*. The sketch, as discursive mode, afforded a compositional freedom particularly congenial to a comic writer like Thackeray. He had already published *Comic Tales and Sketches* (1841) and even considered for his masterpiece the subtitle “Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society.” The tour sketch was, moreover, one of his favorite modes, his reputation partly resting on the success obtained with travel books like *The Paris Sketch Book* (1840), *The Irish Sketch Book* (1843), and *Notes of a Journey From Cornhill to Grand Cairo* (1846).

The road-side sketch “Waterloo” opens in a note of ironic resignation. Thackeray, bored like “any gentleman” by endless dinner-table discussions of the battle considers “what a fine thing it will be in after-days to say that I have been to Brussels and never seen the field of Waterloo” (*Little Travels* 295). But this ironic triumph lies beyond his courage: “this pitch of philosophy was unattainable.” Thus a certain ethical ambivalence regarding the implicit obligation of this attestation presides over the whole.³⁸ Thackeray is unwilling to be identified with “every British party” touring the Continent with a red copy of *Murray’s Handbook* (296).³⁹ But he was bound to cast himself in this role and countenance the consequences. At Brussels he mounted on a Namur diligence and set off towards Waterloo. Anxious with expectation, he asks “the conductor if he had been at the battle,” and receives a demystifying answer, “*Pas si bête*,” which rekindles the ironic innuendo of the outset. A brief account of a conversation with a farmer is followed by comments on *Murray’s Handbook*. Thackeray lavishes ambiguous praise on Murray’s choice of a Southey sonnet as lyrical introduction to the site. The poem, “That temple to our hearts was hallow’d now,” ekphrastically tied to the English memorial, is an epitaph to an epitaph. Thackeray has much to object to its high-flown re-monumentalization. What bothers him most is the exclusiveness implicit in the reference to “the gallant comrades’ rank”: “But I confess fairly that, in looking at these tablets, I felt very much disappointed at not seeing the names of the *men* as well as the officers” (297). A demotic scruple, already broached by William Dundas in the parliamentary debate and

akin to Wordsworth's emotional egalitarianism ("we felt as men *should* feel"), fuels his angry exposure of misallocated social vanity. State symbolic representation has furnished a memorial based on selective computation, thus excluding real men from its "clause of closure and security."⁴⁰ Thackeray proceeds to impugn this false count – "Are they to be counted for nought?" – and to suggest an enlarged representation: "A few more inches of marble to each monument would have given space for all the names of the men. . ." (297).⁴¹ This demand for democratic comprehensiveness bespeaks Thackeray's acknowledgment of the "common visual signature of modernity," one which Koselleck discovers in the war memorial:

[A]s war memorials become more widespread, they are divested more and more of the traditional differences of the society of estates. The physical memorial, previously reserved for great personages, was to include everyone and to do so in the name of all. The individual soldier killed in action becomes entitled to a memorial. Democratization is brought together with functionalization. With this, the equality of death, formerly only related to the Christian world to come, also gains an egalitarian claim on the political entity in whose service death was met. The names of all the dead become individually inscribed, or at least the number of dead noted, on memorial plaques and monuments to soldiers killed in action, so that in the future no one sinks into the past. (291–92)

Thackeray knew however that no amount of secular immanence and modern inner-worldliness would manage to defeat the estate-ruled hierarchical order of English society, even in postmortem iconography. Inasmuch as the *political entity* was still non-egalitarian owing to rampant lordolatry and other related vices, to gain an "egalitarian claim on the political entity in whose service" British soldiers died could be seen as a formidably unreachable goal. The remainder of Thackeray's sketch is a ruthlessly dialogized demystification of patriotic glory: "But live or die, win or lose, what do *they* get? English glory is too genteel to meddle with those humble fellows" (298). A further attempt at sympathetic nationalism ("Let an Englishman go and see that field, and he *never forgets* it. The sight is an event in his life" 298) leads deceitfully to a final brutal inversion:

It is a wrong, egotistical, savage, unchristian feeling, and that's the truth of it. A man of peace has no right to be dazzled by that red-coated glory, and to intoxicate his vanity with those remembrances of carnage and triumph. The same sentence which tells us that on earth there ought to be peace and good-will amongst men, tells us to whom GLORY belongs. (298)

Along with the wish to divest carnage of symbolic trappings, the bottom line of this sermonizing is a bestowal of praise on the invisible virtues of the unknown soldier. As in the above-quoted passage from Scott's novel in which the Cameronian leader speaks, the keyword here is *vanity*. Shortly after this tour, back in his London headquarters, Thackeray surely relished the fierce *Punch* controversy about Wyatt's statue of the Duke of Wellington.⁴² The media's satirical lampooning of the English Achilles yielded a sly restaging of the question "to whom GLORY belongs," the perfect starting point for a novel with a banished hero.

Thus the road-side tour sketch "Waterloo" contains *in nuce* the allegorical thrust of *Vanity Fair*: the vanity of human wishes. The genetic bearing of this small piece on the composition of the novel can be gauged, moreover, by examining the way it becomes literally reenacted at least three times. *Vanity Fair* incorporates the Waterloo tour in three related versions. The

first tour, Mr. Osborne's, is preceded by secret funerary arrangements. Less than three months after the battle, he commissions "an elaborate monument . . . where Britannia was represented weeping over an urn, and a broken sword, and a couchant lion" in honor of his deceased son (441; ch. 35). While the narrator deflates solemnity by evoking the sudden upsurge in the demand for these "funeral emblems" covered with "braggart heathen allegories," the young ladies of the family are deeply moved when they first notice it in the wall of their London church:

Under the memorial in question were emblazoned the well-known and pompous Osborne arms; and the inscription said, that the monument was "Sacred to the memory of George Osborne, Junior, Esq., late a Captain in His Majesty's —th regiment of foot, who fell on the 18th of June, 1815, aged 28 years, while fighting for his King and country in the glorious victory of Waterloo. *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.*" (441; ch. 35)

The next surprise is their father's decision to go to Brussels, still "a military hospital for months after the battle" (442; ch. 35). There he meets a sergeant of his son's regiment who offers to guide him in "the journey of Waterloo and Quatre Bras, a journey which thousands of his countrymen were then taking" (443; ch. 35). There follows a brief but detailed account of the battle, in free indirect style, that closes in a hammer-stroke: "the captain, hurrying and rushing down the hill waving his sword, received a shot and fell dead." The sergeant describes how Dobbin took George's body back to Brussels and had him buried. This tragic report is interrupted by a host of battle scavengers offering war spoils: "The peasants and relic-hunters about the place were screaming round the air, as the soldier told his story, offering for sale all sorts of mementoes of the fight, crosses, and epaulets, and shattered cuirasses, and eagles" (444). Thackeray's strategy is here ruthlessly bathetic, aimed at proving that pathos has fled a symbolic market where heroic death is for sale and the *sublime* is traded *à bon marché*.⁴³ Mr. Osborne senses this inadequacy, but his anger remains highly idiosyncratic. In his visit to George's burial place he finds "humiliation" in the fact that his son, "an English gentleman, a captain in the famous British army," should lie in an "unconsecrated garden" of the burial-ground, at very little distance from where "the Roman Catholic dead repose" (444). But the truth is that George himself, while visiting this "pretty burial-ground" of Laeken during an excursion before the battle, "had lightly expressed his wish to have his grave made" right there. This clash of desires, where nothing but the vanity of death is actually at issue, compels the narrator to intone his didactic mantra: "Which of us can tell how much vanity lurks in our warmest regards for others, and how selfish our love is?" (444).

Becky plays the lead in the second tour sketch. Fleeing creditors, she leaves Paris and heads towards Brussels, a city that inevitably awakens strong recollections. This visit, however, harbors a secret agenda: "She went to Waterloo and to Laeken, where George Osborne's monument much struck her. She made a little sketch of it. 'That poor Cupid!' she said; 'how dreadfully he was in love with me, and what a fool he was!'" (820–21; ch. 64). The economy of this crucial passage is overwhelming. This meeting *in absentia* of the novel's two central characters gathers a disturbingly ambivalent significance. First, because Becky confronts a funeral monument to which no reference had been made before, certainly not in the account of Mr. Osborne's visit, where only a "burial-place" is mentioned. For all we know, George's only monument is the cenotaph sculpted in the wall of a London church. It is likely that either Dobbin or Mr. Osborne after his visit decided to commission

a monument, but the narrative is silent in this respect. Second, because Becky reduplicates this enigmatic monument by drawing it in a sketch. A private cenotaph in London, a funeral monument at Laeken, and an official monument at Waterloo: this is openly a case of funerary exasperation. George's memory thus gets disseminated throughout the novel in vestigial traces and memorial inscriptions.⁴⁴ Becky's sketch, seemingly the most modest, is actually the most relevant, since it reveals the potential seriousness of her affections towards George. Her reported mental reaction – "That poor Cupid," "what a fool he was" – is in blatant conflict with her decision to visit these elegiac places. For this is not simply the female Napoleon compelled to survey the site of her defeat. Her real loss, I would suggest, is much deeper and pitched to a different scale.

The last sketch, the narrator's, placed in chapter 28, is but a shortened version of Thackeray's "Waterloo" road-side sketch.⁴⁵ In chapter 62, moreover, the narrator breaks again into the narrative in the capacity of direct witness of the small troupe of English characters (Dobbin, Amelia, and small George) who, embarked on a tour through Germany, enjoy "the happiest time" of their lives: "It was on this very tour that I, the present writer of a history of which every word is true, had the pleasure to see them first, and to make their acquaintance" (792, 793; ch. 62). But what is it exactly that he sees? The previous sentence offers a telling illustration: little George climbing trees, Dobbin smoking his cigar, "whilst Emmy sketched the site or ruin." Note the paradox: while Becky sketches George's Belgian monument, Amelia sketches German ruins. The parallel, quite unmistakable, overflows with irreducible irony. Furthermore, Thackeray deepens the irony by sketching them sketching.

VI. *The Letter*

CHAPTER 8 OF *VANITY FAIR*, LARGELY consisting of a long letter from Becky to Amelia describing her arrival to the house of Queen's Crawley, is rich in literary evocation, both explicit (*The Mysteries of Udolpho*) and implicit (*Northanger Abbey*). Yet the hidden source is *Pamela*: Becky is after all a vain governess who, exposed to the seduction of her masters, marries the younger, a feat of rank transgression that arouses social indignation. Further, *Vanity Fair* and *Pamela* share a moral concern with epistolary secrecy and letter survival, as if in confirmation of Johnson's dictum that "the best subject for epitaphs is private virtue."⁴⁶ True enough, the use of letters in the articulation of narrative hinges (disclosures, revelations) was a common enough device in the nineteenth-century narrative tradition, up to Fontane's *Effi Briest*. Yet Thackeray's reliance on it in *Vanity Fair* is exceptionally insidious. The novel abounds in references to semi-clandestine letter writing and transaction – to epistles inside drawers, letters on pincushions, notes on trays, billet-doux among flowers. Two particular letters are of singular importance, both written by George shortly before the battle. The first one, a farewell note addressed to his father, is considered by Mr. Osborne with forensic skepticism:

The letter was in George's well-known bold hand-writing. . . . The great red seal was emblazoned with the sham coat of arms which Osborne had assumed from the Peerage, with "Pax in bello" for a motto; that of a ducal house which the vain old man tried to fancy himself connected. . . . The very seal that sealed it had been robbed from George's dead body as it lay on the field of battle. (440; ch. 35)

This is the letter that prompts the narrator to reflect on the irony of “lying epitaphs.” The son’s emotions – his contrition for extravagant behavior, his gratitude towards the father – elicit only an irate confirmation of unforgiveness. The father’s attention is drawn rather to the quasi-sepulchral ornaments of a letter – the sham coat of arms, the ironic motto – which serve only to mirror back an image of his own worthlessness. The stolen seal – doubly stolen, as it were – is a commanding symbol of inane vanity in a rootless world of marketable pedigrees. Again the seeming extremes of irony and elegy are fused in a deceitful epitaph. The second and more important letter is the note George addresses to Becky, an experienced schemer who “had been used to deal with notes in early life” (358; ch. 29), at the Brussels ball, stuck in a bouquet, “coiled as a snake among the flowers” (356; ch. 29). This note is produced by the latter in a decisive conversation with Amelia that occurs almost at the end of the novel. It is Becky’s only way of proving both the worthlessness of George and the pointlessness of Amelia’s loyalty to his memory:

“Look there, you fool!” Becky said, still with provoking good humour, and taking a little paper out of her belt, she opened it and flung it into Emmy’s lap. “You know his handwriting. He wrote that to me – wanted me to run away with him – gave it me under your nose, the day before he was shot – and served him right!” Becky repeated.

Emmy did not hear her; she was looking at the letter. (866; ch. 67)

This unlikely epitaph, the last one in a sequence that includes two monuments, a cenotaph, a funeral sketch, and the “lying epitaph” to his father, is countered by an act of private iconoclasm: Emmy is grieved “because the idol of her life was tumbled down and shivered at her feet” (866), but elated too inasmuch as she is relieved of her mourning duties. Austenian *constancy* is not exactly a virtue in *Vanity Fair*.

Amelia’s private fate resonates strongly with political echoes: Was Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* endeavoring to relieve England from the *vain* burden of elegizing its heroes? Was he trying to extend the franchise of immortality to all the dead, regardless of their rank and worth, or merely trying to sabotage the underpinnings of heroic commemoration? The answer is unclear. What is adamant is that he envisaged post-Waterloo society as a secular community stripped of its once sacred foundation, hollow and violent at bottom, doomed to revisit its constitutive emptiness in recursive acts of ironic elegizing. Yet no inscription, Thackeray well knew, would ever redeem (replenish, saturate) the original hole. The ravaging effects of epigraphic deception threaten to annul in advance all historiographic attempts, whether heroic or domestic, at mnemonic restoration. If, as Judith Butler argues, “we have to consider the obituary as an act of nation-building” (34), how shall we consider the self-defeating, ironic obituary? The novel’s final lesson is all but reassuring:

Perhaps in *Vanity Fair* there are no better satires than letters. Take a bundle of your dear friend’s of ten years back – your dear friend whom you hate now. Look at a file of your sister’s: how you clung to each other till you quarrelled about the twenty-pound legacy! Get down the roundhand scrawls of your son who has half broken your heart with selfish undutifulness since; or a parcel of your own, breathing endless ardour and love eternal, which were sent back by your mistress when she married the nabob – your mistress for whom you now care no more than for Queen Elizabeth. Vows, love, promises, confidences, gratitude, how queerly they read after a while! There ought to be a law in *Vanity Fair* ordering the destruction of every written document (except receipted tradesmen’s bills) after a certain brief and proper interval. Those quacks and misanthropes who advertise indelible Japan

ink, should be made to perish along with their wicked discoveries. The best ink for Vanity Fair use would be one that faded utterly in a couple of days, and left the paper clean and blank, so that you might write on it to somebody else. (229–30; ch. 19)

A Waterloo field purged of memorials, tablets, pyramids, or a London skyline clean of monuments, where even “Waterloo-bridge had never been thought of” (Dickens 87), effectively reinstates this dystopian dream. Robert Burton cautioned that “tombs and monuments” share with humans the fate of ultimate consumption. Hence the ineffectiveness of mourning the dead: “For what is dear in life that is so dear unto us? . . . The greatest pleasures are common society, to enjoy one another’s presence, feasting, hawking, hunting, brooks, woods, hills, music, dancing, etc.; all this is vanity and loss of time” (Burton 181). The vanity, indeed, of death remembered.

VII. Conclusion

NOTHING IS LOST, I THINK, in placing *Vanity Fair* alongside other masterpieces of anti-heroic understatement like Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, David Jones’s *In Parenthesis*, Stanley Kubrick’s *Paths of Glory*, or W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*. What is gained is not so much a readjustment of its author’s status (his reputation as the melancholy Victorian arch-jester is simply unassailable) as a reconsideration of the novel’s potential modernity. Raymond Williams was right in suggesting that during 1847 and 1848 – the years that witnessed the publication of *Dombey and Son*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *Mary Barton*, *Tancred*, and *Vanity Fair* – something critical happened to the mind of England: “a new kind of consciousness” came into being (Williams 9); one, I would argue, less certain on how to use its violent past in its increasingly vain attempts to secure a peaceful present. And that is indeed a modern uncertainty.⁴⁷ The contemporary meaning of past death escapes us: “The only thing that we may be sure of is the reality of sacrifice, the dying and the dead” (Berlin 16).

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NOTES

1. Stendhal’s impressionistic account of the battle, focalized through Fabrice’s limited standpoint, occupies the third chapter of *La chartreuse de Parme*. Hugo dedicates to the battle the nineteen chapters of the first book of the second part of *Les misérables*. For Hugo’s attitude towards Waterloo, see Houston.
2. A comparison between Tolstoy and Thackeray with respect to the description of battles can be found in Carey (189–93). For a reading of *Vanity Fair* as a critique of heroic historiography, see Hammond.
3. Coleridge’s phrase, taken from his *Lay Sermons*, is quoted by Shaw (17) in an excellent study on which I shall be heavily relying throughout this article.
4. According to Schad, memories of the historical connections between the “Peterloo” massacre of 1819 and Waterloo may have been awakened when the defense of London on the occasion of the Chartist demonstration of April 1848 was entrusted to the Duke of Wellington. Thus, Thackeray, aiming to expose “the evasions and indirections of Tory historiography,” would “take us the long way round the many dead bodies of Waterloo partly because the novel is, at some level, mindful of the eleven dead bodies of Peterloo” (26–27).

5. In the present article I endorse Jameson's conception of History as "absent cause," unnarratable yet narrativizing insofar as it expresses the "inexorable form of events" (102).
6. Apparently, Thackeray postponed twice the writing of the Waterloo number. See Musselwhite (118).
7. The structural centrality is underscored in Fleishman (146).
8. In all four novels, however, the injury of history is inflicted overseas, as if implying that the uncanny domain of the political had limited access to the kind of domestic mimesis that the novel, or at least Thackeray's novel – his "homely story," "little drama" or "domestic comedy" – increasingly solicited.
9. For Thackeray's keen interest in military history, see Whiton. Thackeray's grim perception of violent historical repetition is conveyed in *The History of the Next French Revolution*.
10. For the realist *via media*, see Barnaby.
11. For the novel's resistance to categories, especially that of *novel*, see Rigby (58); Trollope (95); and Kathleen Tillotson (235).
12. The fully dialogized ambiguity in Osborne's death scene is analyzed by Rawlins 163–64.
13. Partial support for this thesis can be found in Stevens and Hammond.
14. Another exposure of the ridicule of domestic commemoration, also placed alongside the Waterloo episode, is the cynical meditation on the Osborne family picture, a "farce of sentiment and smiling lies" (282; ch. 24).
15. While visiting this funeral monument, Defoe evokes the historical episode and disputes the official version of Archbishop Sharp's death (617–43).
16. This seems particularly apt to *Vanity Fair*, where even casual slander brings about epitaphial immortality. In chapter 47, following an eruption of vicious gossip, the narrator asserts: "These are the kinds of epitaphs which men pass over one another in *Vanity Fair*" (595).
17. Two additional factors contribute to reinforce this connection. The first is that *Ivanhoe*, *Old Mortality*, and *Quentin Durward* were the three Scott novels that Thackeray liked best: see Ray (90). The second is that *Old Mortality*, published in 1816, only one year after Scott's early tour to Waterloo, could be read as a Waterloo novel in its own right.
18. The story of the amputation of Lord Uxbridge's leg is apposite here. In Howard's account, Uxbridge addressed the surgeons as follows: "'Well Gentlemen. . . if the amputation is to take place the sooner it is done the better'. . . he never moved or complained, no one ever held his hands. . . . He said smiling 'I have had a pretty long run, I have been a Beau these 47 years and it would not be fair to cut the young men out any longer'; and asked us if we did not admire his vanity" (Howarth 219; qtd. in Shaw 25).
19. The picaresque motif of the fatherless or disinherited son takes on decisive significance in a reading of *Vanity Fair* that privileges Thackeray's "skeptical hermeneutic" (Fisher 10).
20. Carey (184–86) devotes three vigorous pages to the character, defending his psychological and moral virtues as well as his important role in the novel. To Hardy's credit, George was described in her study on Thackeray as "a performer" and "not a simple character" (78). His complexity is sometimes construed as ideologically tarnished. The sexual imperialism informing George's Don Juanesque enslaving of idolatrous Amelia has also been explored by recent critics. See DiBattista; and Thomas (40–75).
21. For the ambiguous sexualization of Regency and post-Regency society with a special focus on the snob, see also Litvak.
22. A lucid and comprehensive analysis of Thackeray's debts in his construction of the Regency dandy can be found in Gilmour (37–83).
23. I extend to Thackeray Shaw's astute interpretation of Coleridge's complex attitude towards war (Shaw 129).
24. In Wheatley's view (83), George is Becky's counter-villain.
25. The exposure of Becky's Napoleonic credentials has a long critical history, one that Thackeray broached in the opening of chapter 64 of *Vanity Fair* with a drawing of Becky dressed as Napoleon looking across the Channel. But see Fraser; Hagan; Gilmour (61–64); and Marks.

26. "Let those civilians who sneer at the acquirements of the army read Sir Harry Smith's account of the Battle of Aliwal. A noble deed was never told in nobler language. And you who doubt if chivalry exists, or the age of heroism has passed by, think of Sir Henry Hardinge, with his son, 'dear little Arthur', riding in front of the lines at Ferozeshah. I hope no English painter will endeavour to illustrate that scene; for who is there to do justice to it? The history of the world contains no more an heroic picture" (*The Book of Snobs* 339).
27. The influence Carlyle exerted on Thackeray's vision of snobbery, dandyism, and flunkeyism is explored by Ousby.
28. "What I want is to make a set of people living without God in the world (only that is a cant phrase) greedy pompous mean perfectly self-satisfied for the most part and at ease about their superior virtue" (Letter to his Mother, 2 July 1847; qtd. in Williams 59).
29. See Semmel, whose otherwise excellent article makes only a passing reference to Thackeray's texts.
30. The German threat during the Second World War gave Virginia Woolf a chance to invoke this iconography: "The butler had been a soldier; had married a lady's maid; and, under a glass case, there was a watch that had stopped a bullet on the field of Waterloo" (*Between the Acts* 37).
31. I follow here Anderson's exposition in *Imagined Communities*. On the one hand, the book is "the first modern-style mass-produced industrial commodity"; its fictional status and serialized form enhanced further its modern impact, for "the novel and the newspaper" (25) meet to produce an "extreme form" of more than "ephemeral popularity" (34); on the other hand, "the cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers" are "arresting emblems of modern culture . . . saturated with ghostly *national* imaginings" (9). The commodification of Waterloo is also analyzed by Hammond (27–34). Another writer who made an oblique but palpable use of Waterloo was Charlotte Brontë, especially in novels with a Belgian setting like *The Professor* and *Villette*. In Longmuir's view, "this battle, along with the Napoleonic wars, is 'ever present but narratively absent' in depictions of Belgium in Brontë's fiction" (170).
32. According to Nora, "les lieux de mémoire naissent et vivent du sentiment qu'il n'y a pas de mémoire spontanée, qu'il faut créer des archives, qu'il faut maintenir des anniversaires, organiser des célébrations, prononcer des éloges funèbres, notariar des actes, parce que ces opérations ne sont pas naturelles" (29). See also in the same volume, Prost, "Les monuments aux morts" (199–223).
33. More so than *The Antiquary* (1816), a novel rightly seen as exploring the ambiguous post-Waterloo political dispensation, *Old Mortality* (1816) is, in my view, Scott's true Waterloo novel. But see Watson (14–17) and Shaw (61–66).
34. The closing lines are: "Heroes! – for instant sacrifices prepared:/Yet filled with ardour and on triumph bent/'Mid direst shocks of mortal accident –/To you who fell, and you whom slaughter spared/To guard the fallen and consummate the event,/Your Country rears this sacred Monument" (40. 9–14). See also Shaw's reading of the sonnet in the light of his reconstruction of the parliamentary debate (148–49).
35. Magdalene De Lancey accompanied her husband, Colonel Sir William De Lancey, to Waterloo and nursed him by the battlefield through his last days. Her account of this experience was read by Walter Scott and Charles Dickens. Both were deeply moved. See De Lancey, 6.
36. Shaw offers a lucid account of the way in which Wordsworth's "interest in the property and propriety of epitaph writing" is projected onto Byron's troubled poetics of commemoration (178–79). See also his analysis of the cousin Howard passage in terms of hollows, gaps, and effacements that drain Byron's elegiac space of "memorial significance" (179).
37. The argument with Lever took place during Thackeray's visit to Dublin in 1842. Apparently, he exasperated Lever by taking the liberal view on the battle (Ray 293). Interestingly, Thackeray's parody of Lever's military novels, "Phil Fogarty: A Tale of the Fighting Onety-Oneth," published in *Punch* in 1847, offers one of the most detailed battle descriptions Thackeray ever wrote. Unsurprisingly, though, the story stages the kind of heroic encounter (the Irish protagonist, wounded by Napoleon, ends up meeting the French leader personally) Thackeray utterly despised. The absence of the Duke of

- Wellington from *Vanity Fair* has always been a source of perplexity and regret among anglomaniacs of successive generations.
38. What is being questioned is the decency of imperialist nostalgia. For an assessment of the Waterloo sketch from the perspective of imperialist attitudes, see Gilmour's "Thackeray: From Europe to Empire."
 39. For the importance of this handbook for Waterloo tourists, see Semmel.
 40. I follow here Badiou's meta-ontological arguments on the State, normality and meta-structure. See *Being and Event* (98).
 41. This "insistence on the particularity of death" could well have been inspired by Thackeray's reading of Byron's *Don Juan*, whose Canto VIII demands a name-by-name computation of the dead making up a "lengthy lexicon of glory" (17. 134). What Shaw calls "the pathos of iterability" (177) is however lost on conventional readers of the *Gazette*: "Think how the joys of reading a Gazette/Are purchased by all agonies and crimes" (125. 993–94). Compare these lines with Thackeray's description of Londoners reading the list – "that catalogue" – of the wounded and the slain at Waterloo at the beginning of chapter 35 of *Vanity Fair*.
 42. For a brilliant analysis of Thackeray's use of this controversy, see Stevens.
 43. The phrase *le sublime à bon marché* is taken from Flaubert's *L'éducation sentimentale* (95). For a penetrating exploration of the role of object fascination, consumption and commodification in *Vanity Fair*, see Miller (30–49).
 44. The cenotaph reappears when the Reverend Mr. Veal prepares "an inscription for a fine marble slab, to be placed up in the Foundling under the monument of Captain George Osborne" (*Vanity Fair* 780; ch. 61).
 45. "When the present writer went to survey with eagle glance the field of Waterloo, we asked the conductor of the diligence, a portly warlike-looking veteran, whether he had been at the battle. 'Pas si bête' – such an answer and sentiment as no Frenchman would own to – was his reply. But on the other hand, the postilion who drove us was a viscount, a son of some bankrupt imperial general, who accepted a pennyworth of beer on the road. The moral is surely a good one" (*Vanity Fair* 336; ch. 28).
 46. Johnson, "An Essay on Epitaphs" (101). See also McKeon's recent reading of Pamela's letters as "treasonable Papers" (639–49); and also *Pamela* (228).
 47. For pre-modern epitaphial certainty, see Kantorowicz. For a cynical interpretation of modern politics as "the care that the living take of war tombs," see Sloterdijk's chapter "Tote ohne Testament" ("Dead Without Testament") in *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, Band II (755–762; my translation).

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