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The starting point of this paper, and the research and theoretical context from which it emerges, is Peter Nora’s concept of the “realm of memory”:

*Lieux de mémoire* arise out of a sense that there is no such thing as spontaneous memory, hence that we must create archives, mark anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and authenticate documents because such things no longer happen as a matter of course. . . . What is true of all *lieux de mémoire* [is] that without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away. These bastions buttress our identities, but if what they defended were not threatened, there would be no need for them.¹

Nora uses “realms of memory,” or “*lieux de mémoire,*” to explore all sorts of constructed and cherished symbols in the French shared memory that contribute to national identity. First popularized in the 1990s, Nora’s study might today seem somewhat passé as a theoretical construct, but it nevertheless suggests an intriguing approach for studying Waterloo, both as a British battlefield located in Belgium and as a site instrumental to British national identity that was constructed in nineteenth-century texts.²

Unlike Nora, I am of course applying the “realms of memory” concept to British national identity as constructed outside of its national borders. In this essay, I discuss famous writers who visited the battlefield of Waterloo and wrote about it, paying homage to the fallen but also bolstering British national pride. I then examine the role of the press in the dissemination of these values through literary texts and pictures celebrating Britain’s triumph. The press thus enhanced the popularity of Waterloo as a physical site of memory that became a destination for authors—and, later in
the century, a variety of British tourists—who sought affirmation of their national ideals.

Tourism became big business over the course of the nineteenth century. In Britain and France, Nancy Green writes, the “nineteenth century remains a period of travel for education and leisure done largely by an upper- or upper-middle-class ‘crowd.’ Crossing the ocean, like crossing the Channel, was both the result and a reinforcement of a well-heeled social identity.”¹ We may assume that this was the case for travellers to Belgium as well. According to James Buzard, Waterloo played a huge part in the development of the tourist trade. The British population felt a sort of liberation after June 1815 since the victory over Napoleon meant that they could once again escape from the British Isles to visit the Continent.² As Mary Shelley commented in “The English in Italy” (1826), an anonymous essay published in the Westminster Review, “When peace came, after many long years of war, when our island prison was opened to us, . . . it was the paramount wish of every English heart . . . to hasten to the continent. . . . A new generation had sprung up, and the whole of this, who had money and time at command, poured, in one vast stream, across de pas de Calais into France: in their numbers, and their eagerness to proceed forwards, they might be compared to the Norwegian rats.”³ Elsewhere in the article, Shelley claims that the English have a pronounced preference for travel to France and Italy. Nicky Woolf, however, claims that there were ten top holiday destinations during the nineteenth century: “1. Nile River Cruise; 2. Paris via Brussels and the Rhine; 3. Davos, Switzerland; 4. Camping in the Holy Land; 5. Niagara Falls; 6. The French seaside; 7. Italy post-Grand Tour; 8. Fjord cruise; 9. Bath; 10. Shanghai.”⁴ Most of these holidays, but not all, were organized by Thomas Cook (1808–92), the man who invented package holidays.

In my study of nineteenth-century periodicals, I have not been able to confirm Woolf’s claim that “Paris via Brussels and the Rhine” was a popular tourist destination. There are no large adverts reading “Visit Brussels” or “Visit Belgium.” Yet Murray’s guide to the Continent, first published in 1836, confirms the role of literary texts in the consecration of Waterloo as a realm of memory; it makes ample use of Southey’s poetry and quotes from Byron’s letters recalling his visit to the site. Murray’s guidebook was the dominant travel guide for post-Waterloo tourists from Britain, at least until Thomas Cook published Cook’s Tourist’s Handbook for Holland, Belgium, and the Rhine in 1874. Travel information is harder to find before 1815, although it is clear that some writers ventured into the Low Countries as part of a grand tour. What are available to us from the pre-Waterloo era are published diaries and journals written by authors who passed through the Low Countries on their way to southern Europe. William Beckford and John Evelyn are probably the best known of these early travellers.
When hearing of the British victory against Napoleon, Beckford was overcome with nationalistic feeling and utter ecstasy: “Jesu, what gothobarbaric rejoicing—like alleluias of the Druids chanting round the great idol of dry straw, full of victims. What horrors, what laughter, what a terrible judgement of God on the blind and brutal fury of the French! How many arms and legs off, how many brains scattered on the ground, what a catalogue of martyrs, dead or cut to pieces whilst yet alive! Never have such important and strong tidings come to my ears; all the other victories pale before it—it is a Trafalgar on land, which, one cannot deny, raises Wellington in a colossal manner.”

The feeling of exaltation epitomized by this quotation can be attributed to newspaper reportage, which constructed Waterloo as a realm of memory. Of course, the news about the battle did not reach Britain as rapidly as war reportage would later in the century with the development of telegraphy. The very first to learn about the outcome of the battle against Napoleon was the banker who had lent Wellington 25 million pounds for the campaign: Nathan Rothschild. His agents were faster at bringing the news than Wellington’s envoy, Major Henry Percy, and this exclusive access allowed him to make a great deal of profit on the stock exchange. The news Harry Percy delivered was first published in the second edition of the Morning Post on June 20, 1815, two days after the defining battle. When gauging the nationalistic feelings engendered by the Napoleonic Wars, it is interesting to see how the Morning Chronicle reacted upon receiving this information. It professed that it had taken pride in attempting to deprecate the “crusade against the French,” but now things had changed: “As our efforts have failed, and the armies have actually engaged, we must hope for the success of our gallant countrymen, who, on the principle of military obedience, venture their lives without examining the cause.”

Interestingly, the Morning Chronicle referred to the rival Morning Post as its source of information but expressed doubt as to the outcome of the battle. In the Morning Post, however, there is no such confusion. Here we see headlines such as “Glorious Intelligence. Defeat of Bonaparte by the Duke of Wellington.” In the next issue, the paper explains in detail how the news came to reach London: “The Hon. Major Percy arrived between eleven and twelve o’clock last night, in a post chaise and four, with two of Napoleon’s eagles captured in battle. . . . He was the bearer of dispatches from the Duke of Wellington, dated Waterloo, the 19th inst. . . . The conflict which ensued was long, dreadful, and most sanguinary. But it gloriously terminated in the complete overthrow of the tyrant’s army. . . . What renders this great and splendid achievement the more gratifying to us, is the proud circumstance of its having been accomplished chiefly by British valour.” On June 22, the readers of the Times were presented with Wellington’s June 19 dispatch—the detailed report about the battle written in his headquarters—which was printed in
full and followed by a list of those killed and wounded in battle (figure 1). However, the dispatch was printed on the third page and was therefore difficult to distinguish from the rest of the news. It was subsequently reprinted under the title “Gazette Extraordinary” that same day as a separate issue of the paper and the next day under the same title in the Morning Post.

It is possible that the June 22 issue of the Times containing Wellington’s dispatch, or its “Gazette Extraordinary,” became the central focus of David Wilkie’s successful painting The Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Waterloo Dispatch (figure 2). In 1816, Wellington commissioned the painting, telling Wilkie it should feature a “number of soldiers of various descriptions, seated upon the benches of a public-house, with porter and tobacco, telling over their old stories.” Wilkie began the painting after traveling to the Continent in 1816 and seeing Waterloo for himself. He may well have decided to feature a newspaper at the centre of the group of pensioners because he realized how important the role of the newspapers had been in turning this heroic battle into a realm of memory for the British people.

In December 1819, Wilkie presented two sketches of the commissioned scene to Wellington for his suggestions and critique. He finished the painting in 1822 and transported it to the Royal Academy, where it caused a sensation. Several of the characters were based on real people, soldiers who had served the nation. The principal characters in the painting, therefore, are all portraits, as described in James S. Virtue’s Wilkie Gallery (1848). The role of the newspaper at the centre of the scene has hitherto not been explored. Virtue and others assumed that there was such a thing as a Gazette of the Battle of Waterloo or a newspaper called the Waterloo Dispatch, but that clearly was not the case. Even so, the piece de resistance of the painting was the newspaper, which symbolised the role of the press in the construction of this realm of memory.

Indeed, even the name of the battle was created by the newspapers. The French newspapers had called it the “Battle of Mont Saint Jean.” British newspapers instead used the name “Waterloo” since Wellington’s dispatch had been dated from his Waterloo headquarters and “Waterloo” sounded more English and was easier to pronounce. Moreover, a few days after Wellington’s dispatch was printed, a poem appeared in the Morning Post entitled “Wellington’s Words after the Glorious Victory of Waterloo,” signed by F. W. This suggests that “Waterloo” was the name adopted for the battle even at the early date of June 27, 1815.

In the Gale 19th Century British Newspapers database, there are 1,291 entries referring to Waterloo in the period between June 18 (the day of battle) and December 31, 1815. After reading reports about the battle, writers and painters stepped in to make the most of the event. One could hardly imagine a better man than Scott to turn Waterloo into a realm of memory. He visited the battlefield in September 1815 and wrote about it...
Figure 2. *Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Waterloo Dispatch* (oil on canvas) by Sir David Wilkie (1785–1841) / Apsley House, The Wellington Museum, London, UK / © Historic England / Bridgeman Images.
in prose, *Paul’s Letters to His Kinsfolk* (1816), and a poem, “The Field of Waterloo” (1815). *Paul’s Letters*, the more critically acclaimed of the two works, was a detailed account of Scott’s visit to the battlefield, including, for instance, a report on the memorabilia he collected and how much he paid for it. *The Augustan Review* lauded the book, saying, “Walter Scott lets one know what Belgium and the Belgians, what France and the French are.”9 Since Scott was a popular poet, everyone expected him to write a poem about Waterloo as well. “The Field of Waterloo” appeared on October 23, 1815. Six thousand copies were printed and, though denigrated by the press, it was published in a third edition by the end of the year.

A quick survey of the periodical press that year shows how the popularity of Scott’s poem was enhanced by adverts and the prepublication of portions of the poem in journals and magazines. *The Weekly Entertainer and West of England Miscellany* seems to have been most interested in Scott’s poem. In November 1815, it published extracts meant to whet the public’s appetite for the whole piece.20 Interestingly, the poem was not only announced and advertised in periodicals but was also the subject of satirical verse. In the March 1816 issue of the *European Magazine, and London Review*, this witty repartee appears:

*Written on a blank leaf in WALTER SCOTT’S FIELD OF WATERLOO, after having read a Criticism, saying, “Scott had fallen in the Field of Waterloo, never to rise again;—Peace to his gallant soul!”*

“Peace to my gallant soul!” sage critics cry,  
This is convincing proof that they can *lie*!  
For whilst in this they pray for my *salvation*,  
Their thoughts and pens, are burling my *damnation*!  
Britons, I ask, What could I nobler do,  
Than fall within the *Field of Waterloo*!  

J. R.21

But this satiric response to Scott’s poem was by no means unique. A poem published in the *New British Lady’s Magazine* demonstrates a patent awareness of Scott’s nationalist agenda:

*To Sir Walter Scott, Esq.*  
On his various Poetical Productions

*Walter Scott!—Walter Scott!  
How hard is his lot  
Who is doom’d to read over thy rhymes?  
Such goblins!—such fright!*
Such sieges!—such fights!
Such customs!—such manners!—such times!
Then comes Waterloo,
With a holloa-bellou!
Of legions disabled and slain:
But you, not content
With the blood they have spent,
Will mangle them all over again.
Ah! teaze our good folks
No more with this hoax,
Which John Bull in a doze could not see;
But now, broad awake,
This tax will not take,—
He’s determined to live, sir, Scott free.  

It is hard to pinpoint exactly why critics disliked Scott’s poem so intensely. He may have been perceived as wallowing too much in the bloody details of the battlefield. For example, in one stanza Scott writes,

Period of honour as of woes,
What bright careers ’twas thine to close!—
Mark’d on thy roll of blood what names
To Britain’s memory, and to Fame’s,
Laid there their last immortal claims!
Thou saw’st in seas of gore expire
Redoubted Picton’s soul of fire—

This and other passages highlight the horrendous loss of life and carnage in “bloody Waterloo.” However, this is balanced elsewhere in the poem by numerous tributes to the courage of his countrymen: “Well hast thou stood, my Country!” He also expresses hope that the battlefield will live on in the nation’s memory: “Ne’er beside their noble grave, / May Briton pass and fail to crave / A blessing on the fallen brave / Who fought with Wellington.”

Several eminent Victorians soon followed Walter Scott’s example. Robert Southey, then poet laureate, visited the battlefield in October 1815. A few years later, architect John Soane, painter Charles Eastlake, and poets Lord Byron and William Wordsworth, to name just a few, followed in his footsteps. “The Poet’s Pilgrimage to Waterloo,” published in 1816, makes it clear that as poet laureate Southey was simply doing his duty:

Me, most of all men, it behoved to raise
The strain of triumph for this foe subdued,
To give a voice to joy, and in my lays
Exalt a nation’s hymn of gratitude,
And blazon forth in song that day’s renown,
For I was graced with England’s laurel crown.26

The poem also emphasizes the symbolic meaning of the victory for the nation. However, in its commentary on the poem, the *Critical Review* does not draw attention to this theme. Instead, it compares Scott’s poem to Southey’s, praising the latter poet’s greater achievement.27

Lord Byron visited the battlefield and Brussels in the summer of 1816 and wrote about both in the third canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (published in November 1816). Byron’s Waterloo verses were also reported on in the periodical press. More interesting for the purpose of this essay, however, is a biographical profile that appeared in the *New Monthly Magazine* and was reprinted in the *Kaleidoscope* (September 15, 1829) which describes Byron’s visit to the battlefield. The anonymous author of this short piece, who apparently had accompanied Byron to Waterloo, recollects that the poet was pleased when he saw the monuments near Mont St. Jean. When Byron was asked what he thought of Scott’s poem on Waterloo, he answered, “There is no poet living who could have written so many good lines on so meagre a subject, in so short a time.”28 That night, the author reports, Byron wrote some lines on Waterloo in his hostess’s scrapbook, just as Scott had done just a few months before. A few months later, those stanzas were published as part of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*.

Wordsworth went to Waterloo five years after the battle in July 1820. Immediately upon hearing the news in 1815, though, he and Southey had danced around a bonfire singing “God save the King” and eating “roasted beef and plum-puddings” in order to celebrate the “greatest victory in British history.”29 His visit to the battlefield prompted a fairly unremarkable sonnet, “After Visiting the Field of Waterloo.” Somewhat more interesting is his ekphrastic poem “On a Portrait of the Duke of Wellington upon the Field of Waterloo, by Haydon,” dated 1840, which paid homage to the heroic battle and its hero.

To examine the pivotal role of the press in the construction of British nationhood and the consecration of Waterloo as a realm of memory, we need to skip a few years ahead to the journalism of William Makepeace Thackeray. Finding himself in dire financial straits, with a wife and two small children to care for, Thackeray agreed to contribute a travel diary to *Fraser’s Magazine* (May 1844–January 1845) about his journey to Waterloo. Writing under one of his many pseudonyms, Michael Angelo Tittmarsh, Thackeray combined two serial genres known for their indefinability: the diary and the periodical. A recently published collection of papers organized at the French université of Brest, *Les Journaux de la vie littéraire,*
attempts to come to grips with the diary as a literary genre. Diaries have
to cope with two antagonistic tendencies: the tendency to turn inward,
which is the intimate aspect of the diary, but also the tendency to look
at the world, which the French theorist Michel Tournier has labelled its
“extimate” aspect. The diary as a genre also has a complex relationship
with periodicals: very often diaries, like periodicals, are not considered
“literature,” and like periodical essays, they are often considered para-
texts to fictional products written by the same author. Yet the two genres
are opposites in the sense that periodicals are meant to be public and are
dressed a large audience.

Thackeray’s diary-like sketches for Fraser’s Magazine are fun and make
for rather pertinent reading, even today. In one passage, for instance, Thac-
kerray appears to reference the power of the press: “Here is the Ghent paper,
which declares that it is beyond a doubt that Louis Napoleon was sent by
the English and Lord Palmerston; and though it states in another part of
the journal (from English authority) that the Prince had never seen Lord
Palmerston, yet the lie will remain uppermost—the people and the edi-
tor will believe it to the end of time.” He is equally aware of the impact
of Waterloo on British national character. He admits to having tried to
avoid the battlefield but eventually finds himself en route to Waterloo with
Murray’s famous guidebook in his hand. The experience is almost life-
changing: “Let an Englishman go and see that field, and he never forgets it.
The sight is an event in his life; and, though it has been seen by millions of
peaceable gents—grocers from Bond Street, meek attorneys from Chancery
Lane, and timid tailors from Piccadilly—I will wager that there is not one
of them but feels a glow as he looks at the place, and remembers that he,
too, is an Englishman.”

Writers were inspired by the experience of travelling abroad and being
confronted with their own nationality as a result of a direct encounter with
another culture. For Evelyn, Beckford, and Scott, the most obvious outlets
for describing these experiences were travel notes in the form of a diary or
letters. Poets, of course, felt the urge to write in verse since that, too, was
a genre associated with personal emotions and feelings. In Thackeray’s
case, the encounter produced an awareness of cultural difference. He did
not respond to Waterloo by writing poetry, but since the visit did affect
him emotionally, one might say he responded in a poetical way. Aware
of the influence of the periodical press, he most likely chose to publish his
impressions of Waterloo in Fraser’s Magazine so as to ensure that he would
play a part in securing the place of the battlefield in his nation’s heart
and memory. The travel diary genre allowed him to convey his personal
impressions in a public medium; however, the convention of pseudony-
mous publication in Fraser’s Magazine enabled him to speak from a more
universalized perspective.
Later in the nineteenth century, Waterloo continued to be a site that was consistently associated with national pride and victory. William Howitt, one of Dickens’s friends, described his visit to the battlefield on a “fine summer morning” in *Household Words*. He began the article by describing his surprise at the speed with which he arrived at the site. For him, there was a stark contrast between the memories of the massacred men and the brightness and fertility of the plain of battle: “Beneath our feet slept seventy thousand men—but above them waved the green corn, and sang the lark, and shone the bright exulting sun.” The remainder of the account is lengthy, interesting, and informative—for example, pointing out which British guide to contact when visiting and which authors to read. Like Thackeray and Southey, Howitt gives the impression that he has a duty to keep the memory of Waterloo alive. His response is in prose, but he includes extracts of verse that create a poetical tone. For example, he includes the following excerpt from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “Casa Guidi Windows”:

Drums and battle-cries
Go out in music of the morning-star—
And soon we shall have thinkers in the place
Of fighters, each found able as a man
To strike electric influence through a race
Unstayed by city-wall and barbican.

Around the same time that Howitt’s essay was published, a selection of Rossetti’s sonnets inspired by his travel to Paris and Belgium appeared in the *Germ*, a newly founded Pre-Raphaelite journal. His Belgium poems were meant to accompany, explain, or historicize the pictures he had seen in medieval Flemish towns. The poems were later published together as “Sonnets for Pictures.”

The Belgian sonnets in the *Germ* were actually part of a poetic diary, a sonnet cycle commenting on his experiences as a traveller which he had copied into letters to his brother William. These sonnets included “On the Field of Waterloo,” but Rossetti chose not to publish the poem in the *Germ*, perhaps because it did not evoke the feelings of national pride and admiration usually associated with commemorative verse. His decision thus may have been a form of self-censorship. The poem reads,

So then, the name which travels side by side
With English life from childhood—Waterloo—
Means this. The sun is setting. “Their strife grew
Till the sunset, and ended,” says our guide.
It lacked the “chord” by stage-use sanctified,
   Yet I believe one should have thrilled. For me,
   I grinned not, and ’twas something;—certainly
These held their point, and did not turn but died:
So much is very well. “Under each span
   Of these ploughed fields” (’tis the guide still) “there rot
   Three nations’ slain, a thousand-thousandfold.”
   Am I to weep? Good sirs, the earth is old:
   Of the whole earth there is no single spot
But hath among its dust the dust of man.

Rossetti combines two genres—diary and sonnet—in order to convey his personal impressions as a young travelling artist. It is less than surprising that Rossetti chose to suppress such sceptical personal impressions. He could not share in the veneration of Wellington and the slain soldiers which he had been forced to listen to since childhood. He most likely did not want such a counter-cultural view to appear in the Pre-Raphaelite journal, however small the audience.

Despite Rossetti’s dissent, Waterloo remained a realm of memory, with Wellington its glorious hero, for most of the nineteenth century. After Wellington’s death in 1852, he and his faithful horse Copenhagen were commemorated in a statue which, until 1883, stood atop the Green Park Arch.
The effigy was later moved to Aldershot and is still the largest bronze equestrian statue in the world. According to John Scott, hundreds, even thousands of Britons set off to visit the field of Waterloo from 1815 onwards, and tourist guides were written in order to advise travellers on the site. When Scottish engineer Robert Scott Burn described visiting the field in 1862, he consistently referred to “old England” and “we English,” but he also used the archaic term “Briton” to label the overpowering nationalist feelings evoked by the battlefield.36

In the last analysis, it seems right to conclude that Waterloo was, and still is, a realm of memory for nineteenth-century Britain, though it was overshadowed by the outbreak of World War I. Some commentators saw a resemblance between Waterloo and World War I. Eric Wood, writing for the Quiver in June 1915, writes, “We have been in the habit of looking back to Waterloo as being one of the epoch-making events of the centuries, and so it is. . . . Today, after one hundred years, we find ourselves in a curiously parallel position: the scene is the same—the blood-stained fields of Belgium.”37 Ultimately, though, Ypres (Ieper) became another British realm of memory in Belgium, eventually eclipsing even Waterloo.

Ghent University
2. Ibid., ix. In the introduction to the English translation of *Realms of Memory*, Lawrence D. Kritzman situates Nora’s theory in the Mitterand era, so it is itself now part of history, the history of historiography.
5. [Shelley], “English in Italy,” 325–26.
9. I was unable to find a copy of the *Morning Post* issue of June 20 but found this information in the June 21 issue: under the title “Glorious Intelligence—Defeat by Bonaparte by the Duke of Wellington,” one reads, “We yesterday had the supreme happiness of announcing, not only in a second edition, but in some thousands of our regular publication, the important and glorious intelligence of the defeat of BONAPARTE” (2).
11. “Glorious Intelligence,” 2.
13. According to a Library of Congress circular, “The issue of *The Times*, London, of June 22, 1815, is ‘Number 9554.’ It has on the third page the news of Wellington’s victory at Waterloo. For this reason the issue has been reprinted. The Library of Congress has both an original and a reprint. These are easily distinguished from each other by the following: The original has four pages of five columns each, the type page measuring 20 5/8 x 14 5/8 inches. The reprint has four pages of four columns each, the type page measuring 15 1/8 x 10 3/16 inches. Much of the contents of the original is omitted from the reprint and replaced by Wellington’s report of the battle headed ‘London Gazette Extraordinary. Thursday, June 22, 1815,’ and a list of the ‘British Officers Killed and Wounded,’ both of these items being reprinted from *The Times* of June 23, 1815.”
16. Ibid., 126.
17. Mont Saint Jean is closer to the battlefield than the village of Waterloo. See Clayton, *Waterloo*, 296.
“Paul’s Letters to His Kinsfolk,” 360.
20. The poem was also excerpted in the Morning Post on November 4, 1815, in an effort to build support for a charity that assisted the widows and orphans of the soldiers who had died or had been wounded on the battlefield. “Walter Scott’s Waterloo,” 3.
22. “To Walter Scott, Esq.,” 49.
24. Ibid., 43.
25. Ibid., 39–40.
31. Titmarsh [Thackeray], “Ghent—Bruges,” 469.
32. Titmarsh [Thackeray], “Waterloo,” 96. His emphasis.
34. Ibid.
35. This included six sonnets published in issue four of the Germ: (1) “A Virgin and Child, by Hans Memmeling; in the Academy of Bruges”; (2) “A Marriage of St. Katherine, by the same; in the Hospital of St. John at Bruges”; (3) “For an Allegorical Dance of Women, by Andrea Mantegna (In the Louvre)”; (4) “For a Venetian Pastoral, by Giorgione (in the Louvre)”; (5) “For Ruggiero and Angelica I”; and (6) “For Ruggiero and Angelica II.” William Michael Rossetti published the poems in an 1886 edition, A Trip to Paris and Belgium. In the 1895 and 1911 editions of his brother’s work, William augmented this initial group with additional poems. See McGann, “Scholarly Commentary.”
36. Burn, Notes of an Agricultural Tour, quoted in Morgan, National Identities and Travel in Victorian Britain, 197.

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W. F. “Wellington’s Words after the Glorious Victory of Waterloo.” Morning Post, June 27, 1815, 3.
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