

The Sage of Waterloo

Background Notes

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Inspiration invariably follows its own obscure agenda. In my case, this was never more evident than in the strange coming together of emotional echoes that helped bring *The Sage of Waterloo* to life.

My fascination with Waterloo and Wellington has deep resonance. As a teenager, I learned from my father – the quintessential English gentleman - how an ancestor of ours, George Francombe (1796-1859), had served as hairdresser to the Duke of Wellington in the Peninsular War. To share a bloodline with someone who had combed the hair of a hero was heady stuff indeed for a young person! When I moved to Belgium in 1987, I spent many happy hours tromping over the stubble of the Waterloo battlefield, tracing the paths where Wellington had once ridden; I stood alone in that fraught emptiness, imagining the sea of wasted life beneath my feet; I squeezed through a breach in the wall of Hougoumont Farm, coming face to face with uniformed ghosts. A glass cabinet in the Wellington Museum housed a hairdressing kit from the period and a frisson passed over me as I lingered before it. Whether my ancestor had groomed the Duke's hair in Spain or at Waterloo made no difference. For the youthful me, Wellington knew no borders. He moved in myth; he rode on air. He even came close in stature to my courtly, charismatic father (though not quite). So those surprisingly modest combs and brushes had achieved the most breathtaking of phenomena: they had shaken history to life, right before my eyes.

Then came the real William - a prominent echo in this story, to be sure: an enigmatic white rabbit who was our daughter's seventh birthday present. For more than ten years, he reigned over the family from the kingdom of our small Brussels garden. William (his nom de plume) was a creature of runes and gestures. He would sink into long periods of reflection, moving his ears like semaphores in apparent communion with a force we couldn't hope to understand. We did, indeed, find him at the *marché de l'abattoir*, where he did, as described, exert singular power over onlookers. We shared many thoughtful moments, that rabbit and I. He *could* have been born at Hougoumont, I suppose: there were several working farms from the Waterloo period on the outskirts of Brussels. But it wasn't until Thomas Hardy added a bell-tone to all the other Waterloo echoes that William's memoir took shape. The poem I encountered was *The Field of Waterloo*.

Yea, the coneys (Hardy begins) *are scared by the thud of hoofs*. I thrilled at the words. He was talking about *rabbits!* And at Waterloo, no less! Other small creatures joined these Napoleonic coneys: *The mole's tunnelled chambers are crushed by wheels...*; and: *The snail draws in at the terrible tread...* Then

came the ultimate frisson; the bell-tone rang true: *The worm asks what can be overhead, and wriggles deep from a scene so grim...*

The worm... I was about six or seven years old. My family was living in suburban Philadelphia prior to a move back to England. There was an empty lot next to the house, large enough for young children to profitably spend hours digging forts (my brother) or searching the grass for small creatures (me). As it happened, the small creatures I kept coming upon were wounded earthworms, victims of my brother's well-meaning but vigorous spade. Some of them were bruised or bludgeoned, others completely severed in two. I set to work at once building them a hospital: a lavish emergency ward appointed with soft, maple-leaf beds and blankets, and handfuls of grass for pillows.

How I wept over those poor, struggling creatures! How miserable they seemed, despite all the comforts I afforded them! Even then, at that young age, I sensed that the best-equipped worm hospital in the world couldn't save them; that the best thing I could do was return them to the soil so that nature could fashion them anew. This last lesson was hard-won. I refused to give up hope, even for my severed patients, whose immobility might have been of some comfort had I understood that they would soon become earth again, and re-emerge from it as a future generation, and that nothing in nature truly dies.

The worm asks what can be overhead... I stood on the Waterloo field one day, thinking of Hardy's delicate, doomed world, and after fifty years, I still wept for my worms. The polyphony behind *The Sage of Waterloo* was complete.

Yea, the coneys are scared by the thud of hoofs,
And their white scuts flash at their vanishing heels,
And swallows abandon the hamlet-roofs.

The mole's tunnelled chambers are crushed by wheels,
The lark's eggs scattered, their owners fled;
And the hedgehog's household the sapper unseals.

The snail draws in at the terrible tread,
But in vain; he is crushed by the felloe-rim.
The worm asks what can be overhead,

And wriggles deep from a scene so grim,
And guesses him safe; for he does not know
What a foul red flood will be soaking him!

Beaten about by the heel and toe
Are butterflies, sick of the day's long rheum,
To die of a worse than the weather-foe.

Trodden and bruised to a miry tomb
Are ears that have greened but will never be gold,
And flowers in the bud that will never bloom.

Thomas Hardy, *The Field of Waterloo*