Objects as meaning; or narrating the past

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This paper pursues the theme of the content of meaning which historical associations give to objects. It employs a particular semiotic approach, broadly that of Saussure, to analyse the way in which individual objects accumulate meanings as time passes. It also discusses the ideas of Wolfgang Iser, a literary critic whose thoughts (like those of many contemporary analysts of literature) are very pertinent to our understanding of objects. These help us to understand how objects are both active and passive (not just passive, as older views held), and how meaning develops as an interactive process between thing and viewer. The semiotic analysis set out in diagram form here can be compared with the similar one given in the Introduction; the framework is the same, and it is a very useful simple way of approaching an understanding of how objects work.

In the collections of the National Army Museum, London, there is an infantry officer's red jacket, of the type known as a coatee, which was worn by Lieutenant Henry Anderson at the battle of Waterloo, in what is now Belgium, on Sunday 18 June 1815. The coatee is on exhibition in the National Army Museum, where it forms a part of the permanent displays. The jacket has been lovingly preserved from that June day to the present, and so we must suppose that it carries a genuine significance for the generations who have lived and died since the battle, up to and including our own. It is the nature and the implications of this significance which this paper sets out to explore.

As a first step, it is necessary to establish the specific context of the jacket in time and space, and to describe the historical moment of which it was a part. Anderson served in the Waterloo campaign as a lieutenant in the light company, 2nd battalion, 69th Regiment of Foot. On 16 June 1815, his regiment had fought at Quatre Bras, the action between the British Army and its allies and the French, which preceded the decisive encounter at Waterloo two days later. Due to a confusion of orders, the 69th were caught in extended line by the charge of Kellermann's brigade of cavalry. They were badly cut up, suffering some hundred and fifty casualties, and their colours were captured by the enemy. At Waterloo, the 2/69th took its place in the line of infantry regiments which held the ridge at Mont St Jean, and in the final phase of the battle, about seven o'clock in the evening, formed square with the 33rd Regiment as the British and Allied line prepared to receive the assault of the Imperial Guard (Whitehorne 1932).

The precise events of this, the most celebrated passage of arms in the entire Napoleonic Wars, has been a matter of dispute ever since. The square next to that of the 33rd and 69th seems to have been driven back in confusion, and that in which Anderson and the 69th stood began to give way until their commanding officer, General Halkett, himself
took the 33rd's standard and encouraged them to stand their ground. At this moment, in the crisis of the battle, Anderson fell, wounded severely 'by a musket ball which broke his left shoulder, passed through the lungs, and made its exit at the back, breaking the scapula' (Army List, 1860). The coatee shows the tears and stains which would have resulted from such a wound. Anderson remained unconscious while the Imperial Guard was halted and turned, first by the attack of the 52nd Regiment and the 1st Foot Guards, and then by the mass of the Allied line: the battle was won and the French formations destroyed (Naylor 1968: 78–80, 159–65; Howarth 1968: 203–7).

Anderson's own, very brief, account of these final events survives in a letter which he contributed to Capt. Siborne's collection as a result of Siborne's requests for information from officers who had served in the battle; the collected letters were ultimately edited and published by his son in 1891 (Siborne 1891: 338). Anderson's slow promotion after 1815, and the considerable time he spent in 'desk jobs', suggest that his injuries at Waterloo left him something of an invalid for the rest of his life.

A number of points about this should be noticed, because they are of importance in the discussion which follows. The historical circumstances of time, place and action in which Anderson wore the surviving coatee, and in which he was wounded and the jacket damaged, are 'facts' as 'real' as any we shall ever have. The defeat of the Imperial Guard was recognized as decisive militarily and politically, and as glorious emotionally, within a few moments of its happening and, in at least some quarters, has been so seen ever since. The part played by the 69th, however, throughout the two battles, was much less prestigious and does not, therefore, form part of the extensive public mythology of the campaign. Anderson himself had his health affected, and we can only guess at the, probably complicated, mixture of feelings which led him to preserve his damaged jacket.

The jacket shows characteristics common to a great many pieces in museum collections, especially those within the broad fields of social history, applied art, and ethnography. Its connotations and historical context are extremely personal, giving it the value and emotional tone of a souvenir: nostalgic, backward-looking and bitter-sweet. It is intensely romantic, in that, for its owner in later life, who was the first person to cherish it, it probably represented a time when life seemed more exciting and more meaningful than the dull present of middle age. It serves, also, to sum up, or make coherent in personal and small-scale terms, an important event which seemed confused, spasmodic and incoherent to most of the individuals who took part in it. Finally, it acts as the validation of a personal narrative: when the original owner told his story of the great battle, he referred to his souvenirs to bear out the truth of what he was saying, and to help him make his personal selection of the moments which he wished to recall (Stewart 1984).

These intensely individual experiences are often of very limited interest to anybody else, and it is this which makes so much of this kind of museum material very intractable to deal with, either in terms of research or for the purposes of a display (or at any rate, of a modern display which aspires to make the past meaningful), because both research and display strive to operate within a broad and generalizing intellectual tradition, to which our jacket, of itself, seems to bear little relationship. But we know that many people do find the jacket worth looking at, because it has a quality which moves and excites us. In museums we are accustomed to call this the 'power of the real thing' and to regard it as the greatest strength which a collection-holding institution commands.

There is a problem here, upon which the concepts of semiotics may enable us to shed some light. We shall hope to show how the jacket works as a message-bearing entity, acting in relationship to Waterloo both as an intrinsic sign and as a metaphorical
symbol, which is capable of a very large range of interpretations; and to explore how this relates to the way in which the present is created from the past. The nature of interpretation is then examined in terms of viewer-response, and this leads to a discussion of the relationship between individual responses and the social consensus of meaning, and so of the role of the curator. Finally, objects are seen as one of several ways of narrating the past.

We may start by viewing the jacket in terms of the fundamental insights achieved by Ferdinand de Saussure, adapting what he offers for an understanding of language to the analysis of other communication systems, in this case material culture (1973). Fig. 4.1, Section A, shows the three conceptual elements and their relationships. Each society 'chooses' from the large (but not infinite) range of possibilities what its individual nature is going to be. This 'choice' is not forever fixed, but will alter as circumstances change, a point to which we shall return. The choice gives each society at any particular moment a large range of communication possibilities, including a body of material culture within which, in the Britain of 1815, was our jacket. To be of social use, this range must be structured according to socially understood rules which command a sufficiently broadly based range of social support. This support is part of the local system of domination and subservience and therefore forms part of the local ideology. The rules, which can be called categories and which are the material equivalent to the grammar of language, and the range of possibilities equivalent to the vocabulary, together make up the deep structure of the society under analysis, and Saussure calls this structured whole the langue.

Later writers, like Barthes (1977), identify the langue, broadly, as the signified, that is to say, the body of social understanding which must operate through a social action of some kind. From the langue of society issues parole, that is the actual action, spoken sentence or performed deed, by means of which each society creates itself and continues its daily life. For Barthes, these concrete performances or embodiments, which he calls signifiers, have no necessary connection with the signified meaning which they carry (although this is debatable). Together, the union of signified and signifier gives us a signe, that is the social construct which members of the group can recognize and understand (Fig. 4.1, Section A).

The position of the jacket in all this seems quite clear. The langue of western European society in 1815 held a mass of material and human 'vocabulary', which included the production of coloured cloths and brass fittings, gunpowder, horse wagons and so on. Its categories included a desire to define armies, and within these armies different ranks and different regiments. The jacket, with its special cut, its red colour, its regimental insignia and its elements indicating rank, shows material structuring at work in classic form. There was, however, no obvious reason why this particular choice should have been made, for there are other ways in which the same social categories could have been expressed. The jacket is then a signe in Barthes's sense, uniting the message (the signified) and the physical embodiment (the signifier).

Saussure shows that the structuring process means that parole works not in discrete pieces but in sets, in which meaning depends upon relationships, and categories are created by the distinction which divides one set from another. The rank which the jacket expresses would be meaningless if there were not other, higher and lower, ranks with which it forms a set. Equally, the category 'army' acquires clearer meaning in relationship to the different category 'navy', where everyone wears blue jackets, and both are distinguished from the category 'civilian'. So, to the lower part of Fig. 4.1, Section A, we can add some of the sets which this society's langue produces as parole.
Range of possibilities which relate to past *langue* & are constantly modified

*langue* broadly 'the signified' in 1815

*parole* in 1815 in which the signified and the chosen signifiers unite to give *signes*

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**METONYMIC SET**

- **civilian**
- **clothes**
- **goods**
- **London**
- **people**
- **horses**
- **surviving material**

**METAPHORICAL RELATIONSHIP**

- **jacket** as symbol
- **Waterloo**
- **noble English brave soldiers**
- **endorsement of Brit. society** (Thackeray)

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**A**

- **civilian**
- **navy**
- **uniform equipment**
- **Trafalgar sailors ships**
- **surviving material**
- **Anderson's jacket**

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**B**

- **jacket**
- **as sign**
- **noble Waterloo soldiers**
- **brave defeat of egalitarian ideals** (ballad)

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**C**

- **jacket**
- **as sign**
- **Waterloo display**
- **Manchester demonstrations**

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*Fig. 4.1 Analysis of communication in material culture terms, using Saussure's system*
We may take the discussion an important stage further by employing the analysis of communication devised by Leach (1976: 12). The message-bearing entity (jacket as signifier) stands for the message (the signified categories) as a result of human choice. At this point, Leach makes a crucial distinction between his sign and his symbol, which is very helpful in enabling us to understand better how the jacket works (confusingly, Leach and Barthes use the same word to describe different things; here the French spelling will be used when Barthes’s meaning is intended, and the English when Leach’s is). Objects (and other messages) operate as a sign when they stand for the whole of which they are an intrinsic part, as the jacket does for the actual events of Waterloo; and in this case the relationship between the different parts of the whole is said to be metonymic. They operate as a symbol when they are brought into an arbitrary association with elements to which they bear no intrinsic relationship, and in this case the association is said to be metaphoric. This association is a human device which bears no logical investigation, but apparently we instinctively behave as if it were true, particularly when objects or actions are connected with our deepest hopes and fears. We are inclined, for example, to invest considerable spiritual capital in religious ritual, which works precisely in this symbolic way, even though both rational thought and accumulated empirical experience suggest that this is misplaced.

This analysis of distinctions gives us a framework for expressing how Waterloo, both in immediate retrospect and ever since, has been experienced and interpreted in a large number of ways, or, to put it in post-structuralist terms, a number of discourses or narratives have been constructed around the event. Some of the broadly contemporary interpretations can be distinguished very readily. The socially approved norm, ideologically endorsed, saw the battle as embodying bravery, loyalty, worthy self-sacrifice and national pride, so that its events became proverbial and all contact with it, like Anderson’s jacket, was lovingly cherished. In Vanity Fair, published in 1847, but dealing chiefly with events around 1815, Thackeray, after a paragraph musing on the brave folly of war, described the battle in one of the most famous passages in English letters (chapter 32):

All our friends took their share and fought like men in the great field. All day long, whilst the women were praying ten miles away, the lines of the dauntless English infantry were receiving and repelling the furious charges of the French horsemen. Guns which were heard at Brussels were ploughing up their ranks, and comrades falling, and the resolute survivors closing in. Towards evening, the attack of the French, repeated and resisted so bravely, slackened in its fury. They had other foes beside the British to engage, or were preparing for a final onset. It came at last: the columns of the Imperial Guard marched up the hill of Saint Jean, at length and at once to sweep the English from the height which they had maintained all day, and spite of all: unscared by the thunder of the artillery, which hurled death from the English line – the dark rolling column pressed on and up the hill. It seemed almost to crest the eminence, when it began to wave and falter. Then it stopped, still facing the shot. Then at last the English troops rushed from the post from which no enemy had been able to dislodge them, and the Guard turned and fled.

No more firing was heard at Brussels – the pursuit rolled miles away. 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.

The view of the contemporary British labouring poor was rather different. A ballad in the BBC Sound Archive, recorded from the singing of Robert Cinnamond in Belfast, which seems to have originated soon after 1815, and which shows a detailed knowledge of Waterloo, gives one expression of the widespread sympathy which the underclass felt for
the ideals of the French Revolution and for Napoleon as their glorious embodiment (Folk Songs of Great Britain, vol. 8, ‘A soldier’s life for me’, Topic Records, 1961):

1 Attention pay, both young and old,
To these few lines that I unfold.
It is the deeds of great Napoleon
I’m going to relate.
He was a gallant Corsican,
As ever stood on Europe’s land,
I’m inclined to sing his praises,
So noble was his heart,
For in every battle manfully
He strove to gain that victorie,
And to the world a terror
Was Napoleon Bonaparte.

2 On that fatal June at Waterloo
It caused Napoleon for to rue,
When he saw the tricks of Grouchy.2
It struck terror to his heart,
For there upon that fatal day;
He was forced to yield or run away,
Like a bullock sold in Smithfield
Was Napoleon Bonaparte.

Egalitarian ideals and a hatred of the British soldiers at the command of the class oppressors are explicitly linked in the period of abortive revolutionary action following 1815. The men who attempted revolution in the Derbyshire Peak in the early days of June 1819, sang:

Every man his skill must try,
He must turn out and not deny;
No bloody soldier must he dread,
He must turn out and fight for bread.
The time is come you plainly see
The government opposed must be.

(Thompson 1968: 723–5)

As the marching men approached Nottingham, they were faced by a small force of Hussars, and their attempt collapsed: three men were ultimately executed and fourteen were transported.

The Derbyshire failure emphasized the dangers of armed conspiracy and, in Thompson’s words (1968: 736–7), Peterloo, on 16 August 1819, followed directly as ‘the outcome of an extraordinarily powerful and determined “constitutionalist” agitation, largely working class in character, within a potentially revolutionary context’. On that day about 60,000 peaceful demonstrators in St Peter’s Fields, Manchester, were deliberately ridden down by the Manchester Yeomanry (local men serving part-time) and the regular 15th Hussars, on the orders of the local magistrates. The number of killed and wounded is uncertain, but there seems to have been about eleven dead and over 300 injured. To quote Thompson again, ‘The epithet itself – Peter-Loo – with its savagely sardonic confidence, indicates better than any other evidence, the tone of feeling’ (1968: 755). We can still hear the contempt for the soldiers and the disparagement of military glory which brought the name to birth, and perhaps, too, echoes of wistful sympathy
for the ideals, if not the realities, of the French armies which we hear in the ballad already quoted, and many others of its kind. To the survivors of Peterloo, Anderson’s coatee would have been experienced in a way quite different from that felt by Thackeray and most of his readers. These examples show the range of interpretations in which the battle and its elements were directly involved. A finer mesh would ultimately bring us down to the feelings of each single individual who was alive at the time with his or her perceptions of loss, gain or indifference; and all these perceptions share an equal validity.

It is clear that, in the terms which we have already described, each of these perceptions forms its own metonymic ‘Waterloo set’, and that these sets have a metaphorical relationship to that of Waterloo itself, and to each other (Fig. 4.1, Section B). The jacket as part of the set to which it has an intrinsic relationship – Waterloo – exists as a sign, but when it is part of the other sets it is acting as a symbol, although, as has been said, it is its metonymic sign nature which enables it to do this. The range of possible metaphorically related sets is very large, because each contemporary was capable of seeing the battle in a very large number of ways. The jacket is correspondingly rich in symbolic possibilities. It is capable of acting as a signifier for much significance, with each one of which the meaning of the sign e changes; or, to put it another way, it is polysemantic.

All these shifting perceptions of the battle and the jacket went into the imaginations (langue) of those who continued to live after the battle was over, forming part of an ever-shifting flux of experience which was passed on as an inheritance to their successors (Fig. 4.1, Section C). The perceptions which matched the aspirations of the class in power naturally tended to suppress or dislodge those which were officially regarded as more subversive, and it is these perceptions which ultimately brought the jacket into its museum collection. In semiotic terms, what happens is that those objects which were once signifiers become themselves the signified, as they became a chosen part of the society’s langue, in which they play a role in modifying both the existing categories and the rules of their use. Put in historical terms, the experience of Waterloo, in all its guises and including its physical souvenirs, becomes part of the collective consciousness, in which it will play its role in bringing about social change. It may be added here that society is an agglomeration of individuals, and although in some senses the whole may be greater than the sum of its parts, it is also true that each individual’s experience follows much the same patterning as has been discussed throughout this paper in social terms.

The jacket and the battle, now part of the signified held in the langue, give rise to a fresh range of signifiers which will find their own appropriate signes, among which, again, may well be the jacket itself. The crucial aspect of the jacket, which differentiates it from most other kinds of message-bearers (or elements in parole), is that while it survives physically it retains its metonymic relationship to the battle itself; of Waterloo, whatever meaning may be attached to it, the jacket remains not in Leach’s terms a ‘symbol’ (however much it may be so described in ordinary speech) but, in his terms, a ‘sign’, an intrinsic part. So we have a sign available for constant symbolic reuse in the strict sense, in the creation of fresh sets of signifiers. The cycle of signified – signifier – signe (= sign: symbol) is constantly repeating itself throughout the span of an individual’s consciousness, and in the course of social action, and it is the sum of these perpetually shifting meanings which makes up our perception of social change. In the example chosen here, the sign which carries meaning is able to do so because, unlike we ourselves who must die, it bears an ‘eternal’ relationship to the receding past, and it is this that we experience as the power of ‘the actual object’.

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This analysis helps us to understand the working of the emotional potency which undoubtedly resides in many supposedly ‘dead’ objects in our collections. It gives a framework for understanding better how our relationship with the material culture of the past operates, and shows that this is part of the way in which we construct our ever-passing present. This rests on the assumption that our reaction to the coatee is as important as the object itself, and the nature of this interaction bears further investigation. We have, as it were, the text created by the coat and its contexts, both originally and as a result of the signification chains already described; and we have the act of realization accomplished by the reader or viewer, the process which Roman Ingarden called Konkretisation (Iser 1974: 274). The meaning of the object lies not wholly in the piece itself, nor wholly in its realization, but somewhere between the two. The object only takes on life or significance when the viewer carries out his realization, and this is dependent partly upon his disposition and experience, and partly upon the content of the object which works upon him. It is this interplay which creates meaning; however, the precise convergence can never be exactly pinpointed but ‘must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader’ (Iser 1974: 274).

It is this ‘virtuality’, to use Wolfgang Iser’s word, which gives rise to the dynamic nature of objects, as it does of texts. As the viewer stands in front of the showcase, he makes use of the various perspectives which the object offers him, some of which have already been suggested: his creative urges are set in motion, his imagination is engaged, and the dynamic process of interpretation and reinterpretation begins, which extends far beyond the mere perception of what the object is. The object activates our own faculties, and the product of this creative activity is the virtual dimension of the object, which endows it with present reality. The message or meaning which the object offers is always incomplete and each viewer fills in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding other possibilities: as he looks he makes his own decisions about how the story is to be told of, for example, Lieutenant Anderson’s feelings on that day.

In this act, the dynamics of viewing are revealed. The object is inexhaustible, but it is this inexhaustibility which forces the viewer to his decisions. The viewing process is selective, and the potential object is richer than any of its realizations. When the same person sees the same coat ten years later, it may appear in a new light, which seems to him more ‘correct’, richer and more perceptive, so that artefact is transformed into experience. In one sense, it is reflecting the developing personality of the viewer and so acting as a kind of mirror; but at the same time the effect of the object is to modify or change the viewer, so that he is a slightly different person from the one he was before. So we have the apparently paradoxical situation in which the viewer is forced to reveal aspects of himself in order to experience a reality which is different from his own, because it is only by leaving behind the familiar world of his own experience that he can take part in the excitement which objects offer; and many of us would feel that this lies at the heart of the museum experience.

The viewer’s process may be taken a stage further. He will endeavour to bring all his imaginative impressions together into the kind of consistency for which we are always searching, since, it seems, that the creation of satisfactorily complete sets, which have a parallel or metaphorical relationship to other perceived sets, is the way in which our minds work to provide distinctions and explanations. This brings us to the final problem to be considered here. The object as it survives has a fixed form and a definite factual history, without which it could not exist and we could not begin to understand it; but if viewing and interpreting it were to consist only of uninhibited speculation, uninterrupted by any ‘realistic’ constraints, the result would be a series of purely
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Individual sequences with little relationship to each other, and meaningful only in terms of the individual personality, no matter how bizarre, idiosyncratic or simply ill-informed this may be.

If the viewer cannot conjure up the kind of consistency just mentioned, which may be described as an act of interpretation, with all the claims to validity which this implies, he will lose interest in the object. But if his interpretation departs too far from contemporary norms, his community will lose interest in him, at least as far as this subject is concerned. This can certainly happen, but more usually it does not and the reason seems to rest in the relationship between object and viewer. The object provokes certain reactions and expectations which we project back on to it in such a way that the polysemantic possibilities are greatly reduced in order to be in keeping with the expectations that have been aroused. To paraphrase Iser, the polysemantic nature of the object and the interpretation-making of the viewer are opposed factors. If the interpretation-making were limited, the polysemantic nature would vanish, but if the polysemantic nature were all-powerful, the interpretation would be destroyed (Iser 1974). Much the same point may be made by saying that the object only exists if it is 'made meaningful' through somebody reacting with it; but, at the same time, that somebody only exists, as a social being, as he is in the process of interaction (as, of course, he is most of the time). The balance is held by the object itself, with its tangible and factual content. About the nature of these, there is a consensus within each individual's community, and so the act of interpretation will bear a relationship to this consensus. Herein lies the dialectical structure of viewing. The need to decipher gives us the chance to bring out both what is in the object and what is in ourselves; it is a dynamic, complex movement which unfolds as time passes, and in the act of interpretative imagination we give form to ourselves.

The nature of this consensus is complex. Among other things, it embraces the body of traditional knowledge and expertise which we may call scholarship or curatorship, and the ability to apply this to a particular object or collection in order to extend the boundary of understanding. But the curator faces both ways. He possesses traditional knowledge, which in the case of the Waterloo jacket means the ability to appreciate its specific nature and history, precisely the qualities which give it its unique value. However, he is also part of the dialectical process, so that each presentation of an object is a selective narrative, and the curator is engaging in a rhetorical act of persuasion, which has an uncertain outcome. The whole process assists each of us to make some kind of sense of our relationship to our past and so to our present, the perpetual re-creation in which meaning is always just through the next door.

Two further points remain to be made. The constant use, in this paper and others like it, of words like 'cipher', 'code', and, above all, 'text', gives us a broad clue to the first: objects and our relationship to them are analysed as if they were written narratives, and this approach needs a little more elaboration. The material to which we react, combining as it does both external events like the coat and internal events like our own imaginative response, always lies in the past, although this past may be as distant as Waterloo or as recent as a moment ago. The past survives in three ways: as objects or material culture; as physical landscape (the difference between which and artefacts is conventional rather than essential); and as narratives (which may, of course, take the form of film or tape as well as of written text). To these should be added a further dimension, that of individual memory, but it seems likely that this memory forms itself as images of objects and places, linked with physical remembrances like heat and cold and with remembered emotions, to construct narratives similar to those which have external form.
The distinction between narrative as 'historical' writing, which claims to 'tell the truth about the past', and narrative which is 'fiction', like a novel or a poem, becomes increasingly flimsy the harder it is looked at. Both will have to bear a relationship to 'external' fact and to a generally received view of the human condition which they illumine, if they are to hold our interest and stimulate our imaginations (and they are generally held to be the greater, the more they achieve this), and both are equally 'true' in the sense that they set out a view of the human social past as conceived by the writer in his day. Both require their present meaning to be constructed in the ways already described, and both, therefore, are subject to Barthes's famous 'death of the author' (1977). But narratives of these various kinds all require a degree of explication to help in the creation of most of their meaning, which is another way of saying that the cultivation of curatorship and scholarship, in the traditional sense, is fundamental to our enhanced understanding of them, in spite of the fact that, as we have seen, scholarship is itself a dialectical process. Precisely the same applies to the objects and the landscapes which survive from the past. These also tell their story, like a verbal or pictorial narrative, and they do this more meaningfully the more they have been studied. Hence the fact that both technical history (the events of Waterloo and Peterloo), and technical fiction (Vanity Fair), together with that shifting, moody, quicksilver construction which is each individual, have all been drawn into this attempt to unravel the nature of our relationship with the coatee on display; and hence, also, the title of this paper.

Second, it is important to remember that we ourselves – I who write this paper and you who find yourself reading it – are actors in the story. It is our better understanding, as we live our lives, of the processes of making meaning which enables us to analyse the nature of our relation to the objects which come from the past, and to perceive how they affect us, both individually in the dialectical creation of meaning and self, and socially in the ideological creation of unequal relationships. Better understanding in both these modes brings discontent, since it is seldom comfortable to know more either about one’s self or about one’s position in the world, but equally, understanding is a liberating project, even though forever bound in self-related subjectivity. So tension is generated, and it is precisely for these reasons that authors write narratives, museums collect objects and display them, people visit galleries, and we all construct our explaining stories from what we see, read and remember; and all these meanings, as we have seen, are the continuous re-creation of significance through the perpetual play of metaphor and metonymy, of signification and signifier. So the jacket which was once part of Lieutenant Anderson’s past and present now becomes part of our own, carrying the objective reality of its red cloth and its bullet hole along the chain of meanings.


NOTES

1 I am very grateful to Michael Ball and Simon Davies, both of the National Army Museum, London, who supplied me with details about Lt. Henry Anderson and his coatee.

2 On 15 June Napoleon divided his army into three groups, and command of the right wing was given to Marshal Grouchy. On the 17th Grouchy was ordered to pursue the Prussian army, presumed wrongly to be in disarray after the action at Ligny on the 16th, and prevent a junction between the Prussians and Wellington. Grouchy’s force spent the crucial hours of the 18th partly in delay and partly in useless pursuit of part of the Prussian Army. If Grouchy had interpreted his orders differently, or ignored them, or received more sensible orders much earlier, he might have turned towards Waterloo sooner and prevented the arrival of the Prussians on the field and, perhaps, the French defeat. This muddle was used in some quarters to make Grouchy the scapegoat for Napoleon’s failure, in many ways unfairly because the responsibility for the orders which Grouchy was given rests with Napoleon himself. The pro-Bonapartist ballad quoted here takes an extreme view of Grouchy’s actions, and even hints that Napoleon was ‘betrayed’.
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