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The Progress of Patriotism and Biography
The Battle of Trafalgar in Southey's
The Life of Nelson

“**E**very poet,” said Ovid, “bears the burden of Homer” (I.i). And every biographer faces the problems and looks to the standard of Plutarch. But the biographer of a contemporary bears the burden of his times as well—its ethical and literary standards, the economic and political breezes then blowing, the biases of family, friends, and enemies of the subject. One model of the pull of tradition and the tug of the present is Robert Southey’s great *The Life of Nelson*. The counterweights represent biographical progress by retreat and English patriotism by frontal assault.

Those counterweights represent a personal progress for Southey as well. For in the 1790s his reputation as a poet was low and as a loyalist, still lower. The youngest of the “Lake School” poets of Wordsworth and Coleridge, Southey was a frequent target of criticism. The liberal Byron would dub him “mouthey” (rhyming with the pronunciation of his name) for his interminably long poems, and the conservative journals blasted his radical politics that supported the revolution in France. But by 1813 this scorned author had become England’s Poet Laureate by virtue of his conversion to Toryism, and his new politics is reflected in *The Life of Nelson*, a book that became the most popular and revered English biography for a century.

Yet today, like his poetry, even that book is critically ignored. Only Joseph Reed has devoted close attention to it and then strictly to see it as a formal example of nineteenth-century biography and not as a masterpiece that molded English patriotism for times to come.

I plan to illustrate the double progress of patriotism and biography by first sketching out some contexts that influenced Southey's book and then highlighting some detail of its climactic chapter, the account of the Battle of Trafalgar.

A first influence is wartime. When Southey published the biography in 1813, England and France had been at war for twenty-one years. With one brief interruption, the war with Revolutionary France (1793-1802) had brought terror of insurrection at home and then horror of invasion by Napoleon's Imperial France (1803-1815). But during these years, a fierce English battle was also being waged to occupy the high ground of patriotism. Radicals called themselves patriots because of their loathing of monarchy, while loyalists claimed the title because of the need to defend the nation against foreign tyranny. Both sides invoked the tradition of liberty, each citing King Alfred, the Norman invasion, the Magna Carta, and the Glorious Revolution as origins of their own pedigree. The radicals had held claim since about 1775 (Cunningham 11-12), when Dr. Johnson called patriotism "the last refuge of a scoundrel," hitting Wilkes and the republicans. And with the exception of the Time of the Terror in France, as the war ground on, events at home sustained the radical claim. General fast days, the Alien Act (1793), the suspension of Habeas Corpus (1794), the corn shortage and high prices (1794), the Treason Trials (1794), the Quota Bill (1795), the Supplementary Militia Act (1796), and taxes on property (1796), spirits (1797), and income (1799) to support the war effort also prompted grumblings for peace, or at least for a defensive war. Popular opinion kept patriotism to the left.

That soon changed. From 1803 to 1805 Napoleon, now with most of Europe as his satellites, had no fewer than nine plans to invade England. And with invasion proving the clotting factor, patriotism took a turn to starboard.

In its seven wars with France since 1689, England had always cohered not only because of the foreign threat, but because the threat was also Catholic and thus a challenge to traditional English Protestantism.¹ Now that Louis and the monarchy were dead in France, the French challenge was atheistic. And whether Catholic or atheistic, France was a natural enemy to church and king.

Napoleon had massed 167,000 men, reconnaissance balloons, and a flotilla of nearly 2000 boats ready to land in the southern

counties. He waited only for his combat fleets to combine—one moored at Texel, one blockaded at Brest, and others hidden in the mists of the Atlantic—to sail escort to his amphibious invasion. In England it was called “The Great Terror,” and the kingdom braced for attack. Fear was epidemic. With electric speed, rumors swirled that the French had already landed elsewhere on the island. Long lines of wagons waited in village streets to rush away women, children, and the ill from the marauding Grand Army. Foreigners were suspect. Parsons preached instructions on survival and civil defense from their pulpits between prayers to save King, Church, and Country from the atheists. Schoolboys exercised with wooden muskets. Younger boys and old men watched the coasts at night.

Defense scenes fired spirits as well as sparked fears. The cartoonist George Cruikshank wrote that

Every town was a sort of garrison—in one place you might hear the tattoo of some youth learning to beat the drum, at another place some march or national air being practiced upon the fife, and every morning at five o’clock the bugle horn was sounded through the streets, to call the volunteers to a two hours’ drill . . . and then you heard the pop, pop, pop of the single musket, or the heavy sound of the volley, or the distant thunder of the artillery.²

So uniforms were everywhere, delighting the giddy Lydias and Kittys of Jane Austen’s set and feeding the vanity of Rowlandson ensigns in their new regimentals. These uniforms exemplified the manly traits of martial bearing, duty, and strength, and they stood also as ubiquitous symbols of national unity, purpose, and power.

That power was evident not only in the dashing uniforms themselves, but in their numbers and deployment. The Channel Fleet formed a triple arc of “wooden walls.” Defensive redoubts and Martello towers punctuated lines of hundreds of signal beacons along the coasts of England, Wales, and Scotland. Coastal batteries and earthworks also ringed the island, along with the checkerboard pattern of troop deployment by the Duke of York, drawn from tens of thousands of regulars, 176,000

militia, and some 450,000 volunteers mobilized by Pitt.³ Another 147,000 were at sea—officers, seamen, and marines—in some 1,000 ships (Baugh 120, 125). An island garrison, Britain stood alone.

Another influence on the book's origin and reception is the English tradition of sea and the navy. Islandhood had long been central to the national mythology, suggesting insularity, security, independence, racial purity. And it engendered a spirit of nautical adventure and a belief in English exceptionalism. But an island is defined by the sea around it, and to the English, the sea was protection.

With no place in England more than 75 miles from tidal waters, the sea is a large part of the small island's myth.⁴ In *King Richard II* Shakespeare had codified it in the popular lines on "this Scepter'd isle," "this seat of Mars,"

This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands. (II.i. 46-49)

But the sea was more than just a defensive moat. To rule the waves was to preserve and convey English liberty and to improve English wealth through commerce. The navy met the necessity and became an inseparable part of the island myth. Dryden's *Annus Mirabilis* and Thomson's *Rule Britannia* were eloquent expressions of naval importance and popularity. As the flag followed trade, literature followed the flag.

Furthermore, suspicion of a standing army through most of the eighteenth century helped the Royal Navy's prestige by default. A navy was less likely than an army to become involved in long foreign wars expensive in blood and treasure. It appealed to "isolationist" Tories—thus their many "blue water" bills—because, unlike an army it could not be used, as Cromwell had done, to seize English liberties at home. And "imperial" Whigs favored it because it was a floating sentry, keeping safe English trade lanes to the colonies. English liberty, English profits, and English Protestantism all sailed with the "hearts of oak."

Within this context, it is not surprising that one theme prominent in Georgian England during the many French wars

was the admiral-as-hero. Unlike generals who often were stigmatized by the standing-army debate and the army's quartering practices, admirals were among England's most cherished guardians. They could be politicized, as was Vernon, regarded as a figure of the Opposition to Walpole in the 1730s and 1740s. But by the 1790s, naval victories and their admirals "were more likely to boost ministerialism and ministerial constructions of loyalism" (Jordan and Rogers 211). Victories by Howe off Brest on "The Glorious First of June" (1794), Jervis at Cape St. Vincent (1797), Duncan at Camperdown (1797), and Nelson on the Nile (1798) prompted more popular adulation—in songs, inn signs, medals, acclaim in the press, fireworks celebrations, candles in windows, refrains by standing theater audiences and casts of *God Save the King*, *Rule Britannia*, and *Britons Strike Home*. And war poetry with a naval theme became an English genre.⁵

Two other influences are literary: biographical trends and Southey's epic ambitions. Of the literary currents in the 1790s—Gothic novels, "Jacobin" novels, war poetry, reflective-landscape poetry, and political satire—two others stand out. One of them Southey dubbed "epomania," the awakening of interest in the heroic epic. The second was the "trivial" biography, the life of anything-but-heroic subjects.

Starting when he was a radical republican at Oxford, Southey conceived his ambition to write a series of epics that would illustrate the world's dominant mythologies. In this spirit he would write two romantic epics (*Thalaba, the Destroyer* on Islam and *The Curse of Kehama* on Hinduism) and three heroic epics (*Joan of Arc* on France, *Madoc* on Welsh and Aztec cultures, and *Roderick* on the clash of Spanish and Moorish cultures). All carried the grand political theme of liberty vs. tyranny and all bore a resemblance to contemporary events. His first, *Joan of Arc* (1796), for example, illustrates Southey's radical period, attacking England's current war with Revolutionary France. His last, *Roderick, Last of the Goths*, (1814) marks his Toryism by paralleling the Moorish incursion into Spain with the modern French invasion threat to England. Southey's epics all reveal a traditional emphasis on national purpose, a stately decorum in verse and diction, a thematic

unity, a central moral vested in heroism, and a heroic conflict between duty and personal happiness.⁶ Excepting heavy elements of diffusiveness, these would all appear in *The Life of Nelson*.

Another literary trend of the 1790s was biography. Though the eighteenth century had been its great age, by the last two decades, the genre was descending to the trivial. Biographies appeared fast and furious: lives, for example, about John Macdonald, a valet (1790), Mary Robinson, a sentimentalist (1800), Thomas Pennant, an antiquarian (1793), James Lackington, a bookseller, (1791), William Hutton, man of many businesses (1798), John Elwes, a miser (1790), and Mark Moore, a wanderer (1795).⁷ Surveying the biographical landscape of the 1780s and 1790s, critics also lamented the slide of life-writing into mere anecdote.

Truly important people still were subjects—Frederick the Great and Dr. Johnson are the notable examples—but the saints, kings, and warriors of other years had fallen from eminence. While heroic Romanticism was alive in the mediocre epic, democratic Romanticism was rising in mediocre biographies. What was needed to win critical acclaim and popular success was a splicing of the epic hero and the contemporaneity of the biography in short, compelling form. So with a wartime public on an embattled island, the moment was right for Southey with his epic intentions to memorialize an epic-style admiral in a contemporary biography.

Amid this sorry state of epic and biography, by 1810 Nelson had been dead five years, and the war against Napoleon was still raging. Four biographies of Nelson had already appeared, presaging the nearly 50 more that would follow in the early nineteenth century. In 1810, those four reached Southey's desk for review in the *Quarterly*. Besides his own sketch of the admiral, Southey lambasted the books for their bulk, ponderous style, clogged narrative flow, and general formlessness. Approached by the publisher John Murray,⁸ he contracted to do a short biography of Admiral Nelson.

By then Southey had turned to the political right. He was displeased by the laissez-faire attitudes of the Whigs toward the laboring poor. He was frightened by the mob threats of

anarchy prompted by the Burdett and Luddite riots. He was revolted by the assassination of the Tory Prime Minister Spencer Perceval, perceived to be the work of the radicals.⁹ And he was outraged over the liberals' compromise about Napoleon. His foreword, when the book appeared in 1813, made clear his unabashed eighteenth-century exemplary intent: To produce a life of Nelson,

clear and concise enough to become a manual for the young sailor, which he may carry about with him till he has treasured up the example in his memory and in his heart. . . . I shall write the eulogy of our great naval Hero: for the best eulogy of NELSON is the faithful history of his actions: and the best history, that which shall relate them most perspicuously. (Southey v)

Thus Southey's intention: instructive patriotism delivered with epic intensity and biographical accuracy.

The architecture of the book illustrates this intention. It is epic in its sweep and scope, Nelson on a watery globe, beating the Arctic, Indian, Atlantic, Mediterranean, Baltic, and Caribbean, aggressively hunting the French and anxious that, missing his quarry, he would allow Napoleon to mount his English invasion. It is epiclike in its unity, focusing intensely on actions in which the fate of the hero and the fate of the nation both hang in the balance. There are no by-plots, no digressions, no footnotes, no inset biographies of other characters, no blocks of background on the navy, politics, economics, or society. The trajectory of the plot is a relentlessly rising diagonal; in nine chapters we watch Nelson advance in success, rank, and glory, the epic hero inexorably moving toward an end that the reader already knew, a perfect example of "the worthy encompassed by the inevitable," as Thomas Hardy defined great tragedy. Hector and Nelson, Homer and Southey have that in common. Fate broods over the waters where Southey's Nelson sails.

If Southey's architecture is Homeric, his interior design is Plutarchian, modeled on *Parallel Lives of the Greeks and Romans*. Like *Nelson*, the biographies are short. They are largely military. They have a chronological structure, neatly

plotted. They are attempts to define a people by its important men. And Plutarch's and Southey's main business is with their characters' ethos. Plutarch concerns himself with political morality—the implications of Coriolanus as the disdainful patrician, of Alcibiades the demagogue, of Aristides the righteous aristocrat, of Themistocles the consummate democrat. Southey's concern is also with political morality, but it is freighted with his present fear for the nation if duty is not done, thus his intention for *The Life of Nelson* as a character handbook in the service of England.¹⁰ With Nelson as an archetype of duty to God and country, Southey canonizes him the patron saint of patriotism.

Both biographers reveal character through short emblematic scenes. Plutarch, for example, shows the boy Alcibiades in a fight, biting his opponent. Being accused of womanly conduct, Alcibiades replies that he acted as a lion (I.291). That is, Plutarch shows that his quick, clever speech rationalizes a dishonorable action. And that early scene is an emblem of his life.

Like Plutarch, Southey builds emblematic scenes, but he frames tensions as well as traits in them. Through the biography, three of these tensions unify Nelson's character: the tension between duty and happiness, between pride of accomplishment and governmental ingratitude, and between victory and death.¹¹ And patriotism is the stake in every tension. Scenes earlier in the book emblemized and revealed these defining tensions, but Chapter IX, climaxing with the Battle of Trafalgar, resolves them.

The first scene is at Merton to where Nelson had retired, damned with the admiralty's faint praise. At dawn, pacing alone in the garden, with knowledge that the Franco-Spanish Fleet is forming and that the admiralty will offer him a command to engage it, he presumably ponders. The reader can infer his debate: to gratify petty spite or adventure, happiness or duty, love or danger? Then Lady Hamilton appears. To this point Southey has kept her virtually muted, but now she speaks—only the second, and last, time she speaks in the book:

“Nelson,” said she, “however we may lament your absence, offer your services;—they will be accepted, and you will gain a quiet heart by it: you will have a glorious victory, and then you may return here and be happy.” He looked at her with tears in his eyes—“Brave Emma!—Good Emma!—If there were more Emmas there would be more Nelsons.” (314)

Sentimental? Of course. True? By most accounts. And necessary? Perfectly. For in this quiet garden scene, the tension between happiness and duty is resolved. Further, it puts Emma, the scandalous figure, in a positively patriotic light in keeping Nelson’s public actions—not his private life—central, as befits a eulogy. In a single sentence, Dido becomes Penelope as Aeneas-Ulysses takes his final voyage.

A second scene resolves another tension. Leaving Portsmouth to take command of his squadron, Nelson is thronged. “A crowd collected in his train, pressing forward to obtain a sign of his face—many were in tears, and many knelt down before him, and blessed him as he passed” (316). The scene is clipped. It is reported starkly. There is neither dialogue nor description. But it is enough in a short chapter to resolve the second tension, that of Nelson’s wounded pride because of what he perceived to be governmental ingratitude for his brash tactics and the Hamilton scandal. (He resented that he had never reached the rank of full admiral and had been created no more than a viscount after Copenhagen.) Thus, he could believe his duty to be to England—to its subjects and not to its ministers. And in this scene those subjects show England’s gratitude.

But they are not only grateful; they are reverential. The scene is a culmination of the many allusions to mystics, saints, and martyrs throughout the book. Nelson’s earlier depression had been, said Southey, the mystic’s “season of darkness”; after his death his coffin and ensign are torn to pieces “as relics of Saint Nelson” (343). And after the battle scene, Southey caps the point: “The most triumphant death is that of the martyr; the most awful, that of the martyred patriot; the most splendid, that of the hero in the hour of victory” (345). And that national

gratitude, says Southey, arches into the future, "He has left us, not indeed his mantle of inspiration, but a name and an example, which are at this hour inspiring hundreds of the youth of England" (345). Interesting, too, that readers knew that Nelson's ensign was the red cross on white ground of St. George, England's patron saint.

Nelson's haunting—and theatrical—consciousness of death is a leitmotif in the biography and a foreshadowing of Chapter IX. Leading a boarding party at Capt St. Vincent, he exclaims, "Westminster Abbey, or victory!" (113). Before Teneriffe, where he lost his right arm, he writes in a letter, "Tomorrow my head will probably be crowned either with laurel or cypress" (121). Before the Nile, he asserts, "That we shall succeed is certain: who may live to tell the story, is a very different question" (146). And after that battle, Captain Hallowell presented Nelson a coffin fashioned from the mainmast of *L'Orient*, the demolished French flagship. "Nelson," writes Southey, "placed it upright, against the bulkhead of his cabin, behind his chair where he sat at dinner. The gift suited him" (193). In a one-sentence scene just before he leaves London for Portsmouth, Nelson calls "at his upholsterer's, where the coffin . . . was deposited; and desired that its history might be engraven upon the lid, saying, it was highly probable that he might want it on his return" (315).

The short scenes in the garden, at the upholsterer's, and with the Portsmouth crowds offer quick glimpses of the larger themes of duty, fame, and death in their domestic, private, and public moments, all understated, the better to launch the heroic action at Trafalgar. Then the battle scene. As a historical genre, it is as old as Herodotus, and since him the genre has divided into three styles, says John Keegan: the jolly genre scene (the "Dutch Low Life" of the type); the large canvas, highly colored and animated (the "Second Empire Salon School"); and the Neo-Classical scene—severe in mood, sombre in tone and frozen in fate (43-44). Plutarch's are models for the Neo-Classical style. Take, for example Timoleon's attack at the Crimesus River (I.388-92), Marcellus' siege at Syracuse (I.470-74), and Marius' victory over the Cimbri (II.85-92). Each is reported from an aerial view, in a dispassionate tone, described in geometric lines, in past tense, with few speeches.

But Southey extends his master by using four techniques: multiple views of the larger canvas, its small details, Nelson's present-tense voice, and the unifying tension of victory or death. The battle scene rises in relief from the account of the blockade of Cadiz, though in that account, Southey paints the large canvas animated with small details. We see Nelson riding at anchor sixty miles out with his main force, having posted a small inshore squadron to decoy the Combined Fleet into coming out. Then Southey captures the electric expectation on English decks: band music, sports, and theatrical amusements every night, all concluded with "God Save the King," dinners aboard H.M.S. *Victory* with his "band of brothers," and finally, "the Nelson-touch," his sending out his famous three-point plan of attack: two columns abreast cutting into thirds the escaping enemy line, raking them fore and aft, and finishing them in a melee. Here Nelson's plan was to progress beyond eighteenth-century combat goals, for it was not mere victory he sought; he wanted to annihilate the enemy's fleet (Southey 321).

And out they come. We first watch from a sailor's view. "At daybreak the combined fleets were distinctly seen from *Victory's* deck, formed on a close line of battle ahead, on the starboard tack, about twelve miles to leeward, and standing to the south" (322-23): thirty-three men-of-war and seven frigates opposed to Nelson's twenty-seven and four. The crew is beat to quarters, decks are cleared, ports opened, and guns run out. Nelson, bemedaled in admiral's dress, "soon after daylight came upon deck" (323)—like the sun in a purposeful metaphor. Then to his cabin to write his prayer and his petition to King and country for their provision for Emma for her services to England. He runs up the fabled signal, "England expects every man to do his duty!" (327) to cheers throughout the fleet. And Nelson's recurring themes sound again, "I thank God for this opportunity of doing my duty" (327). In this scene that shifts remarkably from a view from deck to a view of Nelson on deck, Southey allows a multiple perspective of the coming battle and Nelson's actions in it. This continues with a large canvas view: "A long swell was setting into the bay of Cadiz; our ships, crowding all sail, moved majestically before it, with light winds from the south-west. The sun shone on the sails of the enemy" (329).

Southey often closes paragraphs with Nelson's voice and then raises our vision to the larger scene. Saying good-bye to one of his band of brothers, for example, he says, "God bless you, Blackwood! I shall never see you again" (330). Then to an aerial view of the lee column and again Nelson's voice, "Look, yonder are the enemy! Shake hands like Englishmen" (331). It is a perfect blend of the pictorial and the dramatic.

Southey builds on the reader's expectation of Nelson's death as he shows *Victory*, under full sail leading the weather-line, under withering raking fire, with Scott, Nelson's secretary, falling and then a party of eight marines killed by shot. A ball rips the buckle of Nelson's flag captain, as a smiling Nelson quips, "This is too warm work, Hardy, to last long" (332). With *Victory* in the van of her column, Southey notes that the French tops are studded with sharpshooters. That's the preparation for the climax. Then, "a ball fired from the mizzen-top . . . struck the epaulette on his left shoulder. . . . He fell upon his face, on the spot covered with his poor secretary's blood. . . . 'They have done for me at last, Hardy' said he" (334). Nelson's back was shot through.

From the quarter-deck to the cockpit and the death scene, a Georgian prototype of a Victorian motif. Surrounded by awe-struck officers, Nelson, dying, asks often of the battle and sounds variations on one theme: duty to Lady Hamilton, duty to England, and duty to God. Thus the curtain line: "Thank God I have done my duty" (338). And with it the last tension is resolved: Nelson has victory and death, an emblem of the 16,000 to 24,000 British dead and wounded every year of the Napoleonic wars. And England's hero is memorialized in a biographical epic.

By returning to Homeric and Plutarchian models, Southey progressed beyond the trivial life-writing of his times. By exemplifying Nelson's heroic loyalty, he created a major symbol merging Romantic Prometheanism and Victorian duty and thus created a hero for two eras. And in his book Southey also advanced the spirit of patriotism that had flamed during the invasion scare of 1803-1805 and blocked the radical's reclaiming of the title. The enemy, he showed, was Napoleon, not the third George; the goal was not unbridled personal

liberty, but the protection of a homeland; the heroes were not the laborers, but the sailors. And England's greatest sailor was Nelson, the model for the young Jack Tars for whom the book was written. That Southey never mentions Nelson's politics may seem evasive; perhaps he wanted, as he promised, to focus only on the hero's naval actions. But by not mentioning them, he allowed loyalty to England to transcend loyalty to faction. No doubt his vivid picture of Nelson above politics helped make this the most popular life of the nineteenth century.¹² The progress of biography was the progress of patriotism. ■

Notes

1. See Colley, who argues that foreign threat, Protestantism, and commercial profit were the chief ingredients forming English nationhood and patriotism.
2. Quoted by Colley (307-08).
3. British defensive preparations are detailed by Wheeler and Broadley, Emsley, Glover, Oman, Richmond, and Schom.
4. Good treatments of England and the sea are Behrman and Pratt.
5. Collections of English war poetry of the time are by Klingberg and Hustvedt, and Bennett. Studies include Bennett, Favret, Hahn, Krahe, and Robinson. See Jones, Kelly, Russell, and Watson on the war and other genres.
6. Notable studies of Southey's epics are by Hoffpauir and Wilkie.
7. Stauffer surveys trends in biography in the 1790s.
8. Southey's connections with the Navy were close and influential. His brother Tom, who edited the book for naval details, was then a line officer in the Royal Navy. His publisher, John Murray, was bookseller both to the Admiralty and the Board of Longitude. And his friend, John Wilson Croker, to whom *The Life* was dedicated, was then secretary to the Admiralty.
9. Simmons, 152-3, listing these events, quotes Sir Walter Scott writing to Southey in 1812, "You are quite right in apprehending a Jacquerie; the country is mined below our feet." Also, see Sack on political orthodoxy in Britain.

10. This is not to say that Southey neglects two major transgressions of Nelson: the Emma Hamilton scandal and the Admiral Caraccioli incident. The first, Nelson's abandoning his wife for his mistress, says Southey, was "an infatuated attachment,—a baneful passion" (199). The second, his meting out a hasty death sentence on little evidence to an aged Italian prince, deserves "severe and unqualified condemnation" (199). As a historian Southey recounts and judges these incidents; as eulogist, he does not dwell on them.
11. Reed, 94-98, recognizes a series of leitmotifs—threats to his sense of destiny—that runs through the book: the threat of death, the threat of love, the threat of convention, and the threat of national ingratitude.
12. Simmons, 143, notes that over 100 printings appeared in nineteenth-century England alone. See also Eastwood and Jordan.

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