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Biographical contentions: Barry Unsworth's *Losing Nelson*

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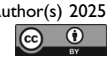

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Abstract

Barry Unsworth's *Losing Nelson*, published in 1999, was the author's response to his publisher's suggestion that he write a biography of Horatio Nelson to commemorate the bicentenary of Trafalgar. The novel is narrated by the sociopathic Charles Cleasby who, endeavouring to produce a hagiography, experiences writer's block when he reaches the events at Naples in 1799. By placing the novel in counterpoint to the three most significant commemorative biographies, this article reflects on 'the cult of Nelson' and the precarity of creating and worshipping heroes.

Keywords

cathexis, Horatio Nelson, introjection, metabiography

Barry Unsworth's *Losing Nelson*[1] 'began with a suggestion from his publisher that he should write a biography of Nelson'.[2] The project foundered. Unsworth set out the reasons in an interview with Charles Nicholl of the *Independent*: 'I'm not a biographer, I'm a novelist. There is also the problem of research here in rural Umbria. And Nelson is exhaustively documented: every sneeze, every breath'.[3] More than 100 biographies of Nelson have been published.[4] Instead of adding to their number, Unsworth elected to

1. Barry Unsworth, *Losing Nelson* (New York, 2000).
2. Charles Nicholl, 'The Books Interview: Barry Unsworth – Grey Skies and Blue Seas', *Independent* (London), 30 July 1999, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/the-books-interview-barry-unsworth-grey-skies-and-blue-seas-1109708.html (accessed 16 December 2023).
3. Nicholl, 'The Books Interview'.
4. Roger Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory: The Life and Achievement of Horatio Nelson* (London, 2005), xxi.

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write a novel, which presents his narrator protagonist, Charles Cleasby – a 42-year-old Englishman – labouring at a hagiography of Nelson, provisionally titled *The Making of a Hero*. '[His] book would be the best account of Horatio ever to appear in print, a profound study of the man and a lasting tribute to the hero'.[5] Unsworth's writerly turn to 'metabiography' (telling a biographer's tale, to echo the title of an A. S. Byatt novel)[6] allows him to reflect on not only the *textuality* of biography, but also, more specifically, 'the cult of Nelson', as we might refer to the authors of manifold texts that have sought to expunge every blight on the Admiral's character and accord him transcendental status. These entranced revisionists set out to make Nelson heroic in every detail, so that he fortifies a nostalgic British, more particularly English, nationalism.

This article reads Cleasby's psychopathy as a comment on tendencies in biographies of Nelson from Robert Southey to the present. It focuses on three contemporary biographies, by Andrew Lambert, Roger Knight and John Sugden, respectively, to establish the degree to which each subscribes to 'the cult of Nelson' – that is, to what degree each biography reiterates or contests the scholarly sycophancy of Cleasby, which is marked by 'cathexis' and 'introjection', two terms I take from psychoanalysis.[7] It will become evident that I do not presume to psychoanalyse the biographers. Rather, I present a close reading of selected passages in their works to establish the degree to which *Losing Nelson* could be held to satirize their biographical dispositions.

Unsworth's historical novels are marked by self-reflexive turns, a staging of the conditions and dynamics of literary historiography. This leads Ulrike Zimmermann, the author of the only scholarly analysis of *Losing Nelson*, to describe the novel as a 'postmodern … book about the failure to write a book, and, more importantly, the writing or un-writing of history'.[8] This is characteristic of Unsworth's oeuvre. His novel *Sacred Hunger* shared the Booker Prize with Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*.[9] It represents the construction of the *Liverpool Merchant* and its maiden voyage to the Guinea Coast to purchase slaves, with the intention of selling them on in Jamaica. The voyage is thwarted as conditions on the ship deteriorate. Matthew Paris, the physician nephew

5. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 26.
6. A. S. Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale* (London, 2000). The term 'metabiography' was coined by Catríona Ní Dhúill in *Metabiography: Reflecting on Biography* (Cham, 2020). She explains: '*Metabiography* argues that the key term of its title, metabiography, is a belated but helpful addition to longer standing debates in literary and historical studies concerning metafiction and metahistory' (2). Her work traces the turn from Carlyle's 'great man' biography to a self-reflective mode. 'Metabiography … takes a step back from biography, seeking to establish a level of reflection, distance, irony, and self-consciousness with regard to the claims, assumptions, and conventions of biography, while in turn galvanizing and transforming biographical practice' (4).
7. Andrew Lambert, *Nelson: Britannia's God of War* (London, 2004); Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*; John Sugden, *Nelson: A Dream of Glory* (London, 2014) and *Nelson: The Sword of Albion* (London, 2014).
8. Ulrike Zimmermann, 'Who Needs a Hero? Barry Unsworth's *Losing Nelson*', *Journal for Maritime Research*, 19, No. 2 (2017), 174.
9. Barry Unsworth, *Sacred Hunger* (London, 1992); Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (London, 1992).

of the ship's owner William Kemp, moved by the suffering of the Africans, instigates a mutiny against the cruel Captain Thurso. The mutineers then intentionally run the ship aground on the Floridian coast and, spurred on by abolitionist sentiments, establish an egalitarian society. A decade later, Erasmus Kemp, the son of the owner, following his father's suicide, leads an attack by Virginian soldiers against the community, which is violently brought to heel. Less well known than *Sacred Hunger*, which has attracted significant scholarly attention, is Unsworth's *Sugar and Rum*.[10] It depicts a fictional author, Benson, who is writing a novel about the Liverpool slave trade but is waylaid by writer's block (much as Cleasby is when he struggles with the details of Nelson's actions in Naples in 1799).

There is nothing distinctly 'postmodern' about writing about writing; it is the signal preoccupation of modernists. But Zimmermann rightly identifies Unsworth's fiction – following Suzanne Keene's taxonomy – as belonging to a category of 'new historical fiction' that is less concerned with recreation and staging the past than it is with interrogating the possibility of doing so.[11] Unsworth is preoccupied, across his oeuvre, with the complex relations between authors of historical fiction and their subject matter, fiction and historiography, and authors and the narrators they contrive. These concerns are apparent in many of his novels – notably, *Pascali's Island*, *The Stone Virgin* and *Morality Play* – but are heightened in *Losing Nelson*.[12]

Losing Nelson opens with Cleasby anxiously waiting for a train in the London Underground. 'It was thirteen minutes to twelve. Imagine my feelings. This was February the fourteenth; it was the two hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Cape St. Vincent, Horatio's first great disobedience, the day he became an angel.'[13] Having been enticed from his Belsize Park reclusion to purchase a bone-china plate bearing a central medallion enclosing the profile of Nelson, Cleasby has risked being late for the start of the battle. His years are structured around the major events in Nelson's life (he has a 'Nelson Calendar'), particularly Nelson's four defining battels (Cape St. Vincent, the Nile, Copenhagen and Trafalgar), which Cleasby simulates annually on the dates on which they occurred. His simulations entail moving scale-model ships across an ocean of a sheet of glass covering the billiard table in his basement. The basement is also a shrine; Cleasby compulsively collects, rather indiscriminately, books about Nelson and memorabilia. These, meticulously arranged, line the walls of the room, to which only he has access.

Cleasby's attachment to his subject has become obsessive over-identification. His mantra is the incidental advice given by a psychiatrist who treated a 20-year-old Cleasby for anxiety and related psychosis: '*Horatio is your lifeline.*'[14] Adam Mars-Jones observes that 'Cleasby's identification with Nelson is so complete that he glides between pronouns. Sometimes Nelson is "Horatio," sometimes "you," "I" or

10. Barry Unsworth, *Sugar and Rum* (New York, 1988).
11. Zimmermann, 'Who Needs a Hero?', 170.
12. Barry Unsworth, *Pascali's Island* (New York, 1980); Barry Unsworth, *The Stone Virgin* (New York, 1985); Barry Unsworth, *Morality Play* (New York, 1995).
13. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 2.
14. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 52.

most disconcertingly "we," as in "the mother we lost so young".'[15] Richard Eder elaborates:

> He slides into 'you,' as if they were shoulder to shoulder on the quarterdeck. Even this is not enough: 'you' advances to first-person plural. 'We' are in a maelstrom of shot and gore, 'we' are being honored and feasted at the court of Naples, 'we' are entertained by Lady Hamilton. And when she comes to bed, 'we' becomes 'I' – until Cleasby wakes in solitary shame subsequent to what Shakespeare nicely called an 'expense of spirit'.[16]

Cleasby considers Nelson his alter ego: 'In spite of all appearances to the contrary, in spite of my obscure life, I knew that he and I were at one, we were like diamond and carbon.'[17] It is this bathetic identification that makes *Losing Nelson* simultaneously sinister and humorous.

In psychoanalytic terms, Cleasby represses the compromised vicissitudes of his psyche (he has suffered several 'breakdowns') through his cathexis onto a hagiographic version of Nelson's life. In other words, he allocates his mental and emotional energies to producing a version of Nelson's life that permits him a more structured, elevated and manageable interiority. Obviously, this is a pathological attachment not only in its dynamics and degree, but also because it necessitates that *his* Nelson – to function as a transcendental organizing principle – be faultless. Cleasby maintains this stance in the absence of interlocutors, his monthly participation in the proceedings of the Nelson Club notwithstanding.

His is a distinctly monological world. It is when he enjoins the services of 'Miss Lily' (as he refers to Lilian Butler of 'Avon Secretarial Services') that his carefully contrived adulation of Nelson becomes strained. He hopes that, with Lilian's help, he 'would extricate Horatio with honour from the languors and horrors of Naples, [he] would accompany him through the final years to his splendid death and sumptuous funeral'.[18] But when Miss Lily introduces quotidian concerns – the age at which Nelson went to sea (he was 12), his abandonment of his first wife Fanny for Emma Hamilton, his arrogance and self-promotion – Cleasby is increasingly unsettled. Miss Lily's fullest interjection is as follows:

> Charles, I know you would like me to admire him as much as you do, and I take that as a compliment, but I can't. It's no good pretending. I can see he had his good points, but I wouldn't like my Bobby [her son] to turn out the way he did, just shaped for one purpose. There is more to life than shooting broadsides at the French, that's all I'm saying. As I see it, they took him away at twelve and sort of processed him. That midshipman business was a way of processing people.

15. Adam Mars-Jones, 'Nelson Had No Time for Queue-Jumping', *Observer* (London), 8 August 1999, https://www.theguardian.com/books/1999/aug/08/adammarsjones (accessed 16 December 2023).
16. Richard Eder, 'Just Wild about Horatio', *New York Times*, 7 November 1999, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/11/07/reviews/991107.07ederlt.html (accessed 16 December 2023).
17. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 104.
18. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 26.

> As far as I can see, they've been processing him ever since. Why couldn't they say, Well, yes, he was a great admiral and a very brave man, and yes, he was generous and warm-hearted, and he won a sweeping victory in the hour of his country's need, but he was narrow-minded and eaten up with vanity and could never admit he was in the wrong? He was a person, in other words. But no, they had to make him into a great man.[19]

Some biographers and historians, in Lilian's characterization, have sought to render Nelson transcendent, someone who is the unqualified embodiment of English heroism.

What if we read Cleasby's hagiographic intentions alongside the three most important biographies published to mark the bicentenary of Trafalgar, those by Andrew Lambert, Roger Knight and John Sugden? How, we might ask, does each biographer deal with the events at Naples in 1799, which cause Cleasby such existential consternation? To answer this question, I will rehearse, albeit briefly, the events themselves, explore Cleasby's conflicting sources, and then comment on the three contemporary biographers' approaches to the controversy. This permits me to make closing comments on the idea of heroic transcendence and the ideologies it undergirds.

The Parthenopean Republic – a short-lived and doomed venture – was established in Naples after Nelson, to ensure their safety, coordinated the removal of the members of Ferdinand IV's court to Palermo. By all accounts, Ferdinand was an ineffectual (and self-regarding) ruler, who permitted his wife, Maria Carolina, the daughter of the Empress of Austria, Maria Theresa, and sister of the guillotined Marie Antoinette, to make decisions regarding affairs at court and to determine foreign policy. Lady Emma Hamilton, the wife of Sir William Hamilton, the English plenipotentiary in Naples, was Maria Carolina's close friend and confidante, and, of course, became Nelson's lover and later the mother of his daughter, Horatia.

Events in Naples took a bloody turn on 13 June with the arrival of 60,000 *lazzaroni*, the royalist mob of Calabrese peasants and brigands under the (halting) command of Cardinal Fabrizio Ruffo. They took control of Naples in the King's name, slaughtering not only Jacobins but also hundreds of citizens 'suspected of Republican sympathies'.[20] The Jacobin rebels who escaped the *lazzaroni* barricaded themselves in the fortresses of Uovo and Nuovo, while around 600 French soldiers holed up in the great fortress at St. Elmo. On 16 June, 'the nerve of the Republicans in the fortresses of Uovo and Nuovo began to fail, and they asked to negotiate terms with Cardinal Ruffo'.[21] A flag of truce was raised. None of those who settled on the terms of the capitulation had the authority to do so (Captain Foote of the Royal Navy signed the agreement on behalf of the British). There is no doubt, however, that the Jacobins believed that the agreement granted them safe passage to the Neapolitan and British ships in the harbour, which would then carry them to Toulon. Nelson, who arrived in Naples with his squadron after the treaty was signed, refused to consider it binding. After impassioned arguments among all those concerned, the Jacobins were embarked onto the Sicilian and British ships, and courts martial for treason were conducted.

19. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 253.
20. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 319.
21. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 319.

The first person to be found guilty of treason and hanged from the yardarm of the Sicilian frigate *La Minerve* was the 70-year-old Admiral Francesco Caracciolo, a senior Neapolitan officer of the marines who had defected to the Republicans, probably under duress. He had been in command of gunboats that had fired at the Neapolitan frigates. Nelson convened the court martial, which proceeded hastily and without witnesses. There is no doubt that the proceedings were, in a narrow sense, legal; Ferdinand, all the sources confirm, had delegated authority to Nelson. But the court martial was hasty, unprocedural and politically motivated. It bears the taint of Machiavellian politics. This was also true of the hundreds of courts martial that were conducted over the next fortnight (around 1,000 rebels were punished; 105 were sentenced to death, with 6 being reprieved). Nelson, 'disastrously out of favour' with George III because of his sycophantic relationship with Prince William Henry,[22] had allied himself fully with the Neapolitan court, where he basked in the royal praise and patronage that he considered his due.

Cleasby finds himself at an impasse when he comes to narrate the events that unfolded in Naples in 1799. He cannot rid himself of doubts about his hero's conduct and cannot proceed with his hagiography until he does:

> Until I found an answer, an acceptable answer, I could not proceed. I had been over the events hour by hour, as far as I had been able to find reliable authority for them, especially the forty-eight hours between Horatio's arrival in Naples and the rebels quitting of the forts.[23]

He is plagued by the question at the heart of the matter:

> Did these people, when they came out of their forts, think that they were going to be shipped to France in accordance with the treaty, or did they think they were going to be handed over to their Sicilian majesties?[24]

If they did not know what they were coming out to, it follows that 'Horatio was first a party to fraud and afterwards covered it up by lying'.[25]

In his agonizing, Cleasby reverts compulsively to 'Robert Southey's scathing verdict of 1812. Those terrible words of his came frequently to my mind these days: … *no alternative but to record the disgraceful story with sorrow and with shame*'.[26] Southey is indeed unambiguous in his assessment: 'a faithful historian is called upon to pronounce a severe and unqualified condemnation of Nelson's conduct'.[27] He goes on to ask pertinent questions about Caracciolo's trial – regarding the formality of Ferdinand's delegation of authority; Nelson's failure to produce written proof of such delegation; the haste of the court martial ('Why was the trial precipitated so that it was impossible for the prisoner, if

22. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 127.
23. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 38.
24. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 110.
25. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 110.
26. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 69.
27. Richard Holmes, ed., *Southey on Nelson: The Life of Nelson by Robert Southey* (London, 2004), 186.

he had been innocent, to provide witnesses who might have proved him so?'); Nelson's refusal to grant a second trial; and the summary execution, which precluded 'any appeal for mercy'.[28] But Southey's most searing indictment is that Nelson's judgement was occluded by his 'infatuation' with the Sicilian court and, more pointedly, with Emma Hamilton:

> Doubtless the British admiral seems to himself to be acting under a rigid sense of justice, but to all persons it was obvious that he was influenced by an infatuated attachment – a baneful passion which destroyed his domestic happiness, and now, in a second instance, stained ineffaceably his Public character.[29]

Approaching the climax of the novel, the manic Cleasby reduces the matter to an allegorical conflict between two Victorian historians, who were contemporaries: (Captain) Alfred Thayer Mahan and Francis Pritchett Badham (a descendant of Captain Foote):

> I had not lost hope of being the one to clear his name. I was reading A. T. Mahan's account of those days, contained in his 1897 life of Nelson and in his subsequent articles in the English Historical Review defending Horatio from charges of fraud. Mahan is the great champion of Horatio's honour and argues the case very strenuously and forcibly. Chief opponent among his contemporaries is F. P. Badham, a waspish close reasoner, dangerously precise in the matter of dates and times. These two, with names so similar, the impetuous and patriotic Mahan and the lucid, sardonic Badham, had come to seem like allegorical figures to me. Virtue and Vice personified.[30]

Mahan traces meticulously the exchanges between Nelson, Ruffo and Hamilton (who acted as a minister of the Sicilian court) following Nelson's repudiation of the 'treaty' that had been signed by Foote 36 hours before the British squadron's arrival in the Bay of Naples.[31] In these communications, Nelson maintained consistently that the unconditional surrender of the French soldiers in St. Elmo and the Jacobins in Uovo and Nuovo was the only acceptable outcome – that the terms of the capitulation, inadequately authorized, held no sway. Mahan concludes from the communications among the parties that '[t]he attempt to implicate Nelson as a partner in a disreputable trick, is mere futile prevarication'.[32] It was, Mahan asserts, Nelson's 'bounden duty', as 'the representative of the King of the Two Sicilies, as well as the Admiral of the British fleet', to act as he did, and his conduct throughout was 'open and consistent'.[33]

Badham did not share Mahan's views. He is best known for having consulted Italian sources hitherto unknown to British historians, based on which he attacked Mahan's version of the events in an article published in the *English Historical Review* in May

28. Holmes , *Southey on Nelson*, 186.
29. Holmes , *Southey on Nelson*, 186.
30. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 230.
31. See Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain* (London, 1899), 371–5.
32. Mahan, *The Life of Nelson*, 880.
33. Mahan, *The Life of Nelson*, 883.

1897.[34] Badham, in a detailed analysis of Ruffo's orders, correspondence and actions, observes that Sicilian officers were, even after Nelson's arrival in Naples, deputed to reassure the Jacobins that they would be granted safe passage.[35] In this pejorative assessment, Nelson was guilty of duplicity, which besmirched his honour. Badham concludes with a frank claim: he has provided 'positive evidence as to a fraud having been actually perpetrated'.[36]

Nelson's conduct at Naples has preoccupied all his biographers. It is potentially an indelible stain on the reputation he had earned as the 'Hero of the Nile' (the words that are etched on the plate Cleasby purchases at the opening of *Losing Nelson*) and would cement at the Battle of Copenhagen and, finally, in 1805, at Trafalgar. Knight observes that '[t]he story of [Caracciolo's] bloated corpse floating past the *Foudroyant* two weeks later is well attested; this image of injustice, still strong, hangs over Nelson's judgement on the death of Caracciolo'.[37] This image – which possesses and derails Cleasby – also haunts contemporary biographies of Nelson.

Let us place Cleasby's grappling with his *The Making of a Hero* alongside three bicentennial biographies of Nelson, those by Andrew Lambert, Roger Knight and John Sugden. This contrapuntal reading may seem contrived (Unsworth's work is, after all, a novel), but it permits us to consider how biographers have, or have not, sought to find a way around the bloated corpse of Caracciolo – how they have solved, or have not sought to solve, Cleasby's insurmountable problem.

Of the three biographies, Lambert's *Nelson: Britannia's God of War* is closest to Cleasby's endeavour; I would go as far as to say that it is peculiarly proximate in intention and spirit but more successful in execution. In his introduction, Lambert avers:

> The real task of this book is to free Nelson of the distortions, errors and absurdities that have been heaped upon his name – most notably the critical judgement of his conduct at Naples in June and July 1799 – but it will also seek to make him more human, and more relevant.[38]

Lambert's tone is defensive from the start: contemporary biographers and historians, he believes, have sullied Nelson's name in their narrowly political, sceptical projects, and it is up to him to restore the Admiral, with almost evangelical verve, to the transcendental heroic greatness expressed in Byron's phrase 'Britannia's God of War'. Encapsulating Nelson's qualities, Lambert is unstinting in his praise: 'he understood the human condition, and based his command on love, not authority. To work with Nelson was to love him; even the most hard-bitten veterans were unable to resist his courage, commitment and charisma'.[39] He goes on: 'Nelson's abilities as a naval commander may justly be described in terms of genius, not merely greatness'.[40]

34. Badham assembled and elaborated his views in *Nelson at Naples: A Journal for 10–30 June 1799 Refuting Various Misstatements of Captain Mahan and Professor J. K. Laughton* (London, 1900).
35. See Badham, *Nelson at Naples*, 36.
36. Badham, *Nelson at Naples*, 38.
37. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 323.
38. Lambert, *Nelson*, xvii.
39. Lambert, *Nelson*, xvii.
40. Lambert, *Nelson*, xvii.

How, given these convictions, does Lambert contend with Naples in 1799? He begins by asserting that the 'criticisms [of Nelson's conduct], on closer inspection, dissolve into the mean-spirited carping of hostile witnesses'.[41] For Lambert, the matter is clear:

> As Commander in Chief of the Neapolitan Navy Nelson [carried] out the King's stated policy and applied the law to the case before him. He had no personal role in the trial, and as the court made no recommendation for clemency, he had no grounds for altering the sentence.[42]

Lambert underscores his point: 'Nelson was acting on the instructions of the Bourbon regime, as their appointed agent. He was not acting on his own authority'.[43] This is not the place to debate these contentions, but Lambert disregards, even suppresses, evidence that contradicts his view. He is more adept at this suppression than Cleasby, who is unable to set aside Southey's and Badham's indictments of Nelson's conduct. Lambert's biography stages itself as an ideological cleansing of the Nelsonian archive, a restoration of an ideal of heroism that he considers lacking in modernity – consequently, his is a conservative, often polemical, endeavour. Lambert, in his survey of contemporary representations of Nelson, refers to Unsworth's novel: 'By the late twentieth-century, the tendency to idolize the dying hero was seen as suspect: Barry Unsworth's *Losing Nelson* … offered a distinctive, alarming view of obsession, presenting the worship of Nelson as a sociopathic complaint'.[44] Was there a moment's hesitation as Lambert penned these words?

Knight's *The Pursuit of Victory: The Life and Achievement of Horatio Nelson* is, to my mind, both more rigorous and less ideologically inclined than Lambert's biography. Knight balances contending views and evades hero worship without disputing the ways in which Nelson was a truly exceptional commander and accomplished diplomat. He demythologizes Nelson, unlike Lambert, who remythologizes him for the modern age. Knight applies pressure to a range of anecdotes integral to the cult of Nelson: he did not, at the age of 12, sit forlornly on the quay staring at the *Raisonable* in the distance, unsure as to how he might get aboard; his head wound during the Battle of the Nile did not result in a flap of skin falling over his good eye; yes, he had a penchant for decorations, but he was not wearing them at Trafalgar (it is erroneously believed that his medals made him recognizable to the sniper who fired the fatal round into his spine); he was not a dedicated Christian, although he understood that religious services on board could mitigate the ever-present threat of mutiny; while he was a commander who consulted his captains and had an easy relationship with his juniors, he resorted to punishment more often than was customary – 'For two years in the Mediterranean (1803–5), with Thomas Masterman Hardy as flag captain, no ship punished its crew more frequently and severely than the *Victory*';[45] and, if we wish to make him exemplary, we should recall that he

41. Lambert, *Nelson*, 150.
42. Lambert, *Nelson*, 158.
43. Lambert, *Nelson*, 158.
44. Lambert, *Nelson*, 359.
45. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 550.

reviled abolitionism, referring in a letter in 1805 to 'the damnable and cursed doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies'.[46]

When it comes to the events of June 1799, Knight argues that Nelson's decision to sail his squadron to Naples 'was more to the advantage of the royalist cause in Naples than to British strategic interests in the region'.[47] Even though he was not yet emotionally involved with Emma Hamilton, Nelson was swayed by the bellicose inclinations of Queen Maria Carolina, whose approbation he sought.[48] He arrived at Naples in a state of agitated introspection: his 'consensual style of leadership had temporarily collapsed' and his 'judgement was warped'.[49] Knight surveys the range of scholarly opinion as to whether the Republicans were tricked. At one extreme is the opinion that 'there is not the slightest proof of any foul play on Nelson's part',[50] while other scholars indict Ruffo, Sir William Hamilton (indirectly) or Micheroux for misleading the rebels. But Knight's verdict is measured and judicious: 'The responsibility cannot, however, be shifted away from Nelson, who had the authority of the king for the operation of bringing Naples under control'.[51] It should be added that 'Nelson rejected a plea for Caracciolo to be shot rather than hanged and for time to prepare himself for death'.[52] To claim, as Lambert does, that Nelson played no part in the proceedings is disingenuous.

Like Lambert, Knight refers to Unsworth's *Losing Nelson*. He concludes his introduction to *The Pursuit of Victory* by observing that the cult of Nelson risks distorting the Admiral's reputation and potentially subverting it:

> This theme is echoed more brutally in Barry Unsworth's recent examination of the Nelson legend in *Losing Nelson*. The main character, besotted by the idea of Nelson, who represents everything that he is not, is confronted in the last pages by the cold reality of the man in Naples, who says, 'Heroes are fabricated in the national dream factory. Heroes are not people.'[53]

It is with this caution in mind that Knight proceeds.

John Sugden, in his magisterial Nelson biography in two volumes, *Nelson: A Dream of Glory* and *Nelson: The Sword of Albion*, integrates innumerable secondary sources. In addition to all published material, he busied himself in the 'labyrinthine files of the Admiralty, Foreign, Colonial, War and Home Offices in the Public Records Office – hundreds of volumes and boxes of first-hand material of every description'.[54] 'Nelson', he observes, 'has suffered from much idolatry and some denigration, but readers deserve dispassionate judgements'.[55] His biographies fulfil this ambition. They are a luminous example of biographical acuity and rigorous historiography. Several

46. Nelson, quoted in Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 549.
47. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 320.
48. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 314–15.
49. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 321.
50. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 322.
51. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 322.
52. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 322.
53. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 322.
54. Sugden, *Nelson: A Dream of Glory*, 10.
55. Sugden, *Nelson: A Dream of Glory*, 12.

biographies of Nelson have been heralded as 'the last word'; Sugden's comes closest to being so, although he generously leaves room for additional scholarship by pointing to questions that remain unanswered.

Regarding the Bourbon Restoration, Sugden comments: 'Nothing Nelson did was more controversial than his "cool reflection" of 26 June [as Hamilton described it], or ultimately proved so damaging to his memory'.[56] On that day, Nelson performed a 'turn-around': having annulled 'the unauthorised and unsatisfactory treaty' on 25 June, he communicated to Ruffo the following day that he would not break the armistice that had been accepted by the Jacobins.[57] He was, it follows, legitimating Ruffo's negotiations with the rebels, during which the Cardinal offered them safe passage. The question this begs is whether the sequence of orders was a ruse on Nelson's part. Had the rebels been lured from the two fortresses with false expectations? Sugden, addressing this question – which has set 'admirers and detractors at each other's throats, trashing each other's sources, conclusions and integrities, and producing a mosaic of obfuscation, confusion and outright myth as well as reasoned advocacy' – follows a prudential middle path.[58] The distinct change in Nelson's orders cannot be disputed, and neither Hamilton nor Nelson spoke with complete candour to those involved (and both later obfuscated when interviewed by historians). On the two days in question, Nelson did not contradict Ruffo when he mistakenly assumed that the Admiral, in communications, was referring to the treaty rather than the terms of the armistice. But, even if Nelson was guilty of a sin of omission rather than commission, he was acting in a theatre of realpolitik, and his actions need to be judged in terms of their consequences – signally, the courts martial and the executions.

Each of these three biographers finds a different path through the events at Naples in 1799. Lambert refuses to acknowledge any wrongdoing by Nelson and sweeps away objections using categorical claims about the authority ceded to Nelson by Ferdinand. Knight sets out, with more historical acuity and scholarly rigour, both sides of the argument. He remains, as he set out to be, dispassionate. Sugden, who is equally thorough, neither valorizes nor vilifies Nelson, but rather embeds his actions in the rather grubby politics of the Bourbon Regime. Each of these biographical strategies is an option for Cleasby. But what, we need to ask, prevents him from choosing one or a combination of these paths? What, differently stated, causes his writer's block?

In her adept analysis of *Losing Nelson*, Zimmermann places Cleasby's writer's block at the centre of her analysis: Cleasby 'does not manage to relate the events that occurred in Naples in June 1799, when the Parthenopean Republic, with its revolutionary sympathies, was brought to a violent end'.[59] We might, however, elaborate on Unsworth's understanding of writer's block through reference to his novel *Sugar and Rum*, the metatext of *Sacred Hunger*, to which I referred earlier. Benson, a 'blocked author' battling to make progress on his novel concerning the Liverpool slave trade, is reduced to reading and commentating on aspiring authors' manuscripts. In this consultant-mentor role, he

56. Sugden, *Nelson: The Sword of Albion*, 241.
57. Sugden, *Nelson: A Dream of Glory*, 240.
58. Sugden, *Nelson: A Dream of Glory*, 241.
59. Zimmermann, 'Who Needs a Hero?', 173.

measures his own lack of progress against the various efforts of his students. At one point, he explains to one of them the nature of writer's block:

> People talk about writer's block as if it were some humorous occasional impediment or recurrent hazard of the trade or just some swank term for laziness or a headache or a hangover. This takes no account of the violence in the word, the choked arrest. *Block*. It's a violent affliction. I have become sensitized to it. I see it in the eyes of children, I see it on the faces of people walking about the city, mothers pushing prams, mad old ladies, men in business suits with briefcases. Block in the great psychic disease of our time. It atrophies those parts that other diseases cannot reach. It isn't a joke at all. It is nausea and dread, it is the foretaste of dissolution. When I listen to myself it's like the silence of the battlefield after the cries have died away, before the birds start singing again.[60]

This characterization – pertinent to our understanding of Cleasby's debilitating impasse – is a distinctly existential account of writer's block. It is not only that the terms 'nausea' and 'dread' evoke Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy; for Benson, narrative gives meaning to an otherwise meaningless world. The alienation and melancholy he experiences, and which he perceives in the faces he meets, are consequences of an inability to generate and structure meaning. Existence, in any meaningful sense, is intrinsically storied, therefore the inability to signify summons the Conradian 'horror' of the abyss. We need to think of Cleasby's writer's block, as he moves towards the sinister conclusion of *Losing Nelson*, in these terms. His selfhood, as I have suggested, depends on his cathexis onto a hagiographic version of Nelson. It is for this reason that he cannot – as Knight and Sugden do – offer an account of Naples in 1799 that is dispassionate and balanced. His ecstatic configuration of Nelson as 'angelic' permits no compromise; he can make no concessions, no qualifications.

To the psychoanalytic term 'cathexis' we might add 'introjection'. While introjection usually refers to the *unconscious* adoption of the thoughts, feelings and character traits of another, we can extend its meaning to cover a pathological attachment to another that is both unconscious *and* conscious. We saw earlier, in the slippage of pronouns, that Cleasby conflates his life and Nelson's. This conflation began with an ecstatic conversion: 'It came with the force of revelation, like an assault of light. All the surrounding circumstances were lit up by it, as if by the arc of a flare in the night'.[61] From that moment on, his attachment to Nelson remained '[u]ndimmed, untarnished over the years'.[62] His cathexis and introjection – elevated and intensified by religious tropes – make Nelson not only his ontological anchor, but also his perverse doppelganger. Under the strain of narrating the events at Naples and Miss Lily's contrarian questions, his faith begins to falter: 'Quite unexpectedly, as it seemed from one day to the next, I had lost the bright track of Horatio's life, slithered down into this scented, tainted well of Naples'.[63] This threatens not only the version of Nelson onto which he is cathected, but also his very being, his selfhood: 'I felt in danger of dissolving there, ending up as

60. Unsworth, *Sugar and Rum*, 100–1.
61. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 19.
62. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 19.
63. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 66.

a mere particle of nutriment for this monstrous host of a city, so flaunting and gross and beautiful, which so much changed Horatio's life'.[64] As his hagiography falters, the organizing principle of his (agoraphobic and monological) being-in-the-world offers diminishing support and succour.

In his desperation, Cleasby travels to Naples in the hope of restoring Nelson to his 'rightful' place in his life:

> There was nothing more that I could do here. If I wanted to keep Horatio with me, I would have to go in person to that city. Naples must contain him still, must contain the truth of those June days.[65]

After failing to find any trace of Nelson in the city, Cleasby meets with Sims, a local librarian who, having written an impressive article about Nelson, Cleasby had proposed as an honorary member of the Nelson Club. Cleasby is looking for reassurance, but Sims' initial comments thwart his hopes. They are worth quoting at length:

> 'My dear man,' he said, 'you have had a disappointing day, but you could walk round in this city every day for a year and you wouldn't see the slightest sign of Nelson anywhere, neither hide nor hair of him. Not a syllable. The Palazzo Sessa looks down over the Piazza dei Martiri. Did you look at the monument there?'
>
> 'No.'
>
> 'The martyrs in question are the Neapolitan Jacobins who went to the scaffold in the name of liberty in 1799, sent there through the good offices of Lord Nelson. This hotel is on a street named after the republic that Nelson helped to bring down.'
>
> 'Yes, I know that.'
>
> 'And do you know that if you went out of here and turned right you would come before long to the Via Caracciolo, a broad and beautiful avenue that runs along beside the sea towards Vomero? Or that if you went a little way up Via Santa Lucia, which is just behind us here, you would arrive at the little church of Santa Maria in Catena, which contains Caracciolo's tomb? That same Caracciolo, the Neapolitan admiral whom Nelson, on doubtful authority, had court martialled for treason and condemned and hanged in the course of a few hours – he was already hanging there from the yardarm when Nelson sat down to dinner. It was Caracciolo's corpse that rode the waves, you remember? Yes, of course, you will have read Parsons's account. The local fishermen recovered his body from the scrape in the sand where the English had left it, without even protection from the dogs. Now he lies there in state, one of Italy's most honoured sons.'[66]

'After all', Sims continues, the Neapolitans 'would not be likely to honour the memory of someone they consider responsible for the destruction of one of the most cultivated

64. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 66.
65. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 294.
66. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 323–4.

societies in Europe'.[67] Cleasby transposes the image of Badham onto Sims' features and thinks to himself: 'Mahan would never have said a thing like that'.[68]

Even more crippling for Cleasby is when Sims draws a general inference from his agonizing dilemma. Sims comments on the naivety and misguidedness of making heroes of historical figures:

> 'Well, heroes are useful, there is no denying that. Nelson was useful at the time, and he has been useful ever since. The Royal Navy keep a silence for him on Trafalgar Day, don't they, and fly the flags at half-mast? Stirring stuff, especially now that most of the glory has departed.'
>
> 'He was a rebel too. He broke the line … .'
>
> My voice was again reduced to little more than a whisper. He gave no sign of having heard me. 'Don't you know it yet?' he said. 'Heroes are fabricated in the national dream factory. Heroes are not people.'[69]

This conclusion, to which Knight refers, is the last straw for Cleasby. It is unconscionable for him to admit that heroism is a social (discursive and ideological) construction – that heroes are made in the public sphere through the careful selection of certain facts and the suppression of others. In this view, there is not only nothing transcendent about Nelson, but also no creditable singularity to his being; rather, he is reinvented by biographers to satisfy their various inclinations. Obviously, the matter is not so simple, but Cleasby experiences this insight as crushing. Once again introverting, he thinks: 'The cruelty that Badham had used against me came to my mind'.[70]

He flees from Sims and finds himself – his interior world in tatters – on a hillside overlooking Naples. As he sits there, a young boy walks up towards him. In his derangement, Cleasby takes the boy to be the 12-year-old Nelson and – either in reality or in his psychotic imagination – beats the boy to death with a rock. The novel concludes:

> Then I walked away, continuing the boy's path, keeping the lights below me. There was no need to hurry now. I had nothing to fear. I had done it, I had broken the line. Dark and bright angels meet at twilight, it is the only time. And when they meet, they join. We can never lose each other now.[71]

This dark turn – the hallucinated Cleasby killing his hero (which has Nietzschean undertones) – is complex. He is not severing the existential bond he has constructed between himself and Nelson, for the act – of violently pathological cathexis – is understood by Cleasby as a merging of his and Nelson's beings. In a perverse, introverted logic, he is an avenging dark angel exerting final, murderous power over the angel of light, on whom his life depends. This reinforces, rather than dispels, the Manichean logic in terms of which he has made a deity of Nelson.

67. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 324.
68. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 324.
69. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 328.
70. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 330.
71. Unsworth, *Losing Nelson*, 338.

Let us dwell for a moment on the image of Cleasby simulating the Battle of St. Vincent in the solitude of his basement. In his cultural history of miniaturization, Simon Garfield states: 'We live in a huge and doomy world, and controlling just a tiny scaled-down part of it restores our sense of order and worth'.[72] He later cites Gaston Bachelard: 'the smarter I am at miniaturising the world, the better I possess it'.[73] In his simulations, Cleasby hovers above the events of history, almost godlike. This is the transcendent position that he accords Nelson – as if his hero descried patterns in the quotidian; was afforded a detached, synoptic view of humanity; and, quite rightly, acted against the grain of the pettiness of us lesser beings, thereby changing the course of human history. Cleasby, on the other hand, becomes increasingly mired in contending representations of Nelson and, finally, cannot, in Matthew Arnold's imagery, rise above the 'darkling plain / Swept with confusing alarms of struggle and flight / Where ignorant armies clash by night'.[74] He seeks in Nelson a chariot of light but finds himself – first incrementally and then dramatically – in the diminished world of representations, of contending narratives. It is pure madness to hope for anything else.

The cult of Nelson, which originated after the British Navy's victory at the Battle of the Nile, depends on expunging from the record any sense that his conduct at Naples in June 1799 entailed iniquity. Some contemporary biographers, as we have seen in the case of Andrew Lambert, have been complicit in perpetuating a myth. Others – Roger Knight and John Sugden among them – set out to present more nuanced interpretations of the relevant historical sources, and their primary concern was not to expunge the stain of Naples from Nelson's reputation, but rather to present the situation in all its contradictory and vexing complexity. When asked by his publisher to write a biography of Nelson, Barry Unsworth clearly read widely. He identified the crux of the matter: How did biographers grapple with Naples? He embodied in Charles Cleasby a hagiographer unable to overcome the dilemma, a man seeking to sanctify the Admiral, despite evidence to the contrary. As a metabiography, *Losing Nelson* not only represents the historical debate about Nelson's conduct at Naples, but has also proved proleptic: biographies published since the novel's appearance, we have seen, had each in their own way to face up to the problems Cleasby fails, with disastrous consequences, to overcome.

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72. Simon Garfield, *In Miniature: How Small Things Illuminate the World* (Edinburgh, 2019), 5.
73. Garfield, *In Miniature*, 5.
74. Matthew Arnold, 'Dover Beach', *Poetry Foundation*, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43588/dover-beach (accessed 16 December 2023).

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