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Harold Nicolson the New Biographer

Harold Nicolson's name is more often associated with the history of diplomacy than with the history of life-writing, though he happens to be one of the main biographers who participated in the development of the modernistic form we have come to call "New Biography." The term was coined by Virginia Woolf in 1927, when she published an article reviewing Nicolson book *Some People* ("The New Biography"). This particular practice, which developed principally in the 1920s and 1930s, breaks away from 19th-century biography, steeped in hagiography and hero-worship; often seeking to demystify and debunk the icons of the Victorian age. Another of its prominent features is its highly literary style, at times toying with fiction, and experimenting with hybrid forms such as "autobiografiction," a practice more specific to postmodern literature, though the term was coined as early as 1906 by the British writer Stephen Reynolds.¹

Harold Nicolson wrote eleven full-length biographical studies from 1921 to 1956, several of which became—and a few remain—reference texts either because of their specific style or due to the original perspective they put forward. I shall discuss here the extent to which his specific contribution to praxis and theory, during the prosperous period for New Biography, grants him an honourable position within the canon of biographical literature.

Nicolson did not start off in life to be a writer. His father was a British diplomat based in Teheran in 1886 when he was born. He spent his early years in several chancelleries in the Orient, before being sent to Britain for his education. After reading History at Balliol, Oxford, he entered the Foreign Office as a diplomat in 1909. It is during this period that he became acquainted with the prominent political and diplomatic figures of the First and Second World War including Lord Curzon, Lloyd George and Churchill. In 1929, he finally chose to give up his diplomatic career in order to be nearer to his wife, the novelist and poet Vita Sackville West, and become a fulltime writer himself. Their son, Nigel Nicolson, wrote *A Portrait of a Marriage*, which has made famous the story of their open union.

The publishing of *Some People* in 1927, I think, marks the moment when Harold Nicolson enters the canon. Virginia Woolf singled him out in her manifesto essay 'The New Biography,' which was primarily intended as a review of Nicolson's book and now represents one of her main theoretical studies on biography. It is also in this essay that Woolf's famous expression 'the granite and the rainbow' appears, a trope Woolf used to describe the biographer's mission of bringing together, in a creative way, the immutable granite facts of history and the ungraspable rainbow rays of personality so as to deliver a truthful, understandable portrait of a subject. In the same essay Woolf

¹ See Max Saunders, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 165.

speaks of a ‘new school of biographies,’² to which Harold Nicolson is said to belong alongside Lytton Strachey, a precursor of New Biography, author of *Eminent Victorians*, *Queen Victoria*, *Elizabeth and Essex*, and also André Maurois, author of the lives of Shelley, Disraeli, Byron, Edward VII, and of the Clark lecture entitled *Aspects of Biography*. Virginia Woolf herself contributed to this school with *Orlando* (1928), a fictionalized biography of her lover of the time, who was none other than Vita Sackville-West, Nicolson’s wife; with *Flush* (1933), the life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s cocker spaniel; as well as with the biography of her Bloomsbury friend, Roger Fry (1940).

However, Nicolson’s debut in biography can be traced to 1919 when he was sent to Paris by the Foreign Office as part of the British delegation at the Peace Conferences. It is during this period that he started writing his first biography, *Paul Verlaine*.³ The emotional turmoil of that year may very well have provided the impulse which laid the foundation of his literary career. His wife, and mother of both his sons, had eloped with the poetess Violet Keppel, with whom she was living in the South of France. Furthermore, it was in 1919 that Nicolson was introduced to the intellectual and artistic circles in Paris. Through his friend the painter Comte Jean de Gaigneron he became acquainted with André Gide, Paul Adam, Jean Cocteau, and he even met the great Proust himself. Nicolson offers a subtle, ironic portrait of him in his diary, inspired by their encounter at the Ritz Hotel, which Nicolson writes with finesse, revealing his literary potential.

March 2, 1919

Paris

Dine at the Ritz—a swell [Marcel] Proust is there. He is white, unshaven, grubby, slip-faced. He puts his fur coat on afterwards and sits hunched there in white kid-gloves. Two cups of black coffee he has, with chunks of sugar. Yet, in his talk, there is no affection. He asks me questions. Will I please tell him how the Committees work? I say, ‘Well, we generally meet at 10. There are secretaries behind...’ ‘Mais non, mais non, vous allez trop vite. Recommencez. Vous prenez la voiture de la délégation. Vous descendez au Quai d’Orsay. Vous montez l’escalier. Vous entrez dans la salle... Et alors? Précisez, mon cher, précisez.’ So I tell him everything. The sham cordiality of it all; the hand-shakes; the maps; the rustle of papers; the tea in the next room; the macaroons. He listens enthralled, interrupting from time to time—‘Mais précisez, mon cher monsieur, n’allez pas trop vite.’⁴

Nicolson excelled in recreating atmosphere; it is because Nicolson is surprised by there being no affectation in Proust’s manner of talking that we understand how odd his dress and idiosyncrasies are—he puts on his fur coat after sitting down. This, however, does not diminish his aura in any way—Nicolson’s admiration for Proust was boundless at the time. Proust is at first glance the centre of attention: he is the only one depicted; he is the one who is quoted in direct speech and leads the conversation. However, it is distinctly Proust’s questions that Nicolson relates. In this way, Proust becomes a lens. First the solemnity of the official picture of the Peace Conferences is conveyed; but, thanks to Proust’s insistence, we gain access to the backstage: the tea and macaroons,

² Virginia Woolf, ‘The New Biography,’ *Granite and Rainbow* [1956], London, Forgotten Books, 2015, p. 152.

³ Norman Rose, *Harold Nicolson*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2005, p. 82.

⁴ *The Harold Nicolson Diaries: 1907-1964* (1966), ed. Nigel Nicolson, London, Phoenix, 2004, p. 21.

hand-shakes and chitchatting, 'the sham cordiality of it all' (while whole populations nervously await the fate of their countries and frontiers). By the end of the entry we realize that Proust is not the focus of the picture, he is merely a mirror in which Nicolson's own image appears. And we discover Nicolson's esteem for Proust and love for the French language—not to be translated—his acute observation of those minute details that have so much to communicate, as well his piquant subversive sense of humour. Nicolson is a *bon vivant*. He is sociable, snobbish and carefree, as he shamelessly relates to Proust, the outsider in all this.

The passage brings to light a central aspect of Nicolson's life-writing which also happens to be a chief feature of New Biography: the way the focus constantly shifts from the subject to the puppeteering biographer. Virginia Woolf was able to pinpoint it precisely in her essay 'The New Biography.' What she saw in Nicolson's writing sums up the essence of New Biography:

So it would seem as if one of the great advantages of the new school to which Mr Nicolson belongs is the lack of pose, humbug, solemnity. [...] [T]hey maintain that the man himself, the pith, and essence of his character, shows itself to the observant eye in the tone of a voice, the turn of a head, some little phrase or anecdote picked up in passing. Thus in two subtle phrases, in one passage of brilliant description, whole chapters of the Victorian volume are synthesized and summed up. *Some People* is full of examples of this new phase of the biographer's art. Mr. Nicolson wants to describe a governess and he tells us she has a drop at the end of her nose and made him salute the quarterdeck. He wants to describe Lord Curzon [to whom Nicolson had been secretary] and he makes him lose his trousers and recite 'Tears, Idle Tears.' He does not cumber himself with a single fact about them. He waits till they have said or done something characteristic, and then he pounces on it with glee. But [...] [h]e lies in wait for his own absurdities as artfully as for theirs. Indeed, by the end of the book we realize that the figure which has been most completely and most subtly displayed is that of the author. Each of the supposed subjects holds up in his or her small bright diminishing mirror a different reflection of Harold Nicolson.⁵

This mirroring effect is itself akin to the technique Nicolson uses in his earlier sketch of Proust. It relates to a general Modernist apprehension that reality cannot be grasped directly but only through subjective experience. This also concerns the self, and *our* self, the perception of which can only be indirect.

In *Self Impression*, Max Saunders offers an extended study of Modernist experiments with life-writing. One particular practice he identifies is composite portraiture, in which the portraits of several people are collapsed into one subject. We can see this clearly with Nicolson's 'mirroring effect,' for instance in his biography of Paul Verlaine. The writing of this book coincided with a difficult time in his private life. His marriage came close to collapsing. When still in England, Harold had noted the frequent presence of Violet Keppel at their cottage: 'Violet there,' his journal mentions simply; and 'Viti [is] seedy.'⁶ He noticed that Vita had 'rather got wanderlust.'⁷ Harold was right to be wary. Violet Keppel was Vita's intimate friend and lover; she was a poetess, as was Vita. His wife's passion for Violet and her 'wanderlust' combined and

⁵ Woolf, 'The New Biography,' *op. cit.*, p. 154.

⁶ Oxford, Balliol College, *Diaries of Harold Nicolson* (13 April 1918), digitalised manuscript diaries. By courtesy of Balliol College, University of Oxford, whom I would like to thank for graciously allowing me to quote from the diaries held at Balliol Library.

⁷ *Ibid.* (8 May 1918).

explain the reason why she suddenly decided to elope with Violet, instead of joining Harold in Paris. As noted, the literary connections Nicolson was to make in France, combined with his personal story, provide some understanding of the reasons that brought him to compose this biography of the scandalous, decadent, French poet. Was his turning to literature an attempt to regain the attention of the wife and author who had abandoned him? There's a strong moralising tone in Nicolson's biography of Verlaine and Nicolson's depiction of the way Rimbaud brought Verlaine's life down can be read as an open letter to Vita, warning her of the dangers of giving her heart to someone as reckless as the poetess Violet was. Nicolson gives heed to Rimbaud's 'La Vierge folle,' which makes us wonder whether Verlaine's *ménage à trois* reflects Nicolson's own. Nicolson quotes Rimbaud's closing lines, amplifying the poem's contextual ambiguities.

Je lui suis soumise.—Ah! je suis folle!...
Drôle de ménage!⁸

Who is the 'foolish virgin'? It's Paul Verlaine, under Rimbaud's pen, but it can also allude to Harold's status. Or is it Vita? Totally subdued to Violet, that 'poisonous orchid,' in Nicolson's terms, 'glimmering and stinking in the recesses of life, and throwing cadaverous sweetness on the morning's breeze. Darling she is evil,' Nicolson once wrote to Vita.⁹

When Verlaine abandons his wife Mathilde, Nicolson notes: 'she would get over it; she would come back to him afterwards.'¹⁰ According to Nigel Nicolson's *A Portrait of a Marriage*, likewise, 'Vita never knew how much [Harold] minded, and guessed, correctly, that no matter what she did, she would always be forgiven.'¹¹ Vita had 'wanderlust,' and so did the juvenile 'Ange et démon poète,' Rimbaud. Harold writes of him that 'the mania of "Wanderlust" had seized upon his senses' and he goes on to quote Rimbaud's poem, 'Les Poètes de sept ans': 'Du grand désert où luit la Libérie ravie, / Forêts, soleils, rives, savanes!'¹²

As in a Francis Galton composite photography, a dazzling, interwoven portrait is assembled in each of Nicolson's subjects, containing, also superimposed, the traits of the various protagonists in Nicolson's own life, without excluding himself.

Some People is also to be valued as a new experimental trend within the genre of portrait-collections, in relation to Nicolson's own position as the explicit biographer in his own text. Saunders calls the texts in which a biographer and his work are at the heart of the narrative 'biografiction,' though he notes that this particular form was not yet common among the modernists, coming into its own as a postmodernist practice. Nicolson's text then belongs to that small collection, alongside Woolf's *Orlando*, which is cited by Saunders as a case of modernist 'biografiction.'¹³ The question of the influence of Nicolson's text on Woolf's is not an insignificant one: Woolf reviewed *Some People* whilst in the midst of composing *Orlando*, which she would only finish

⁸ Harold Nicolson, *Paul Verlaine*, London, Constable, 1921, Internet Archive.org, 6 October 2015, p. 74.

⁹ Nigel Nicolson, *A Portrait of a Marriage* (1973), London, Orion Books, 1992, p. 134.

¹⁰ H. Nicolson, *Paul Verlaine*, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

¹¹ N. Nicolson, *A Portrait of a Marriage*, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

¹² H. Nicolson, *Paul Verlaine*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

¹³ Saunders, *Self Impression*, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

writing the following year. *Some People* can be considered as a hybrid between 'biografiction,' in that the narrator is explicitly the biographer and the author, and 'autobiografiction' in that the author's own life is represented in the text. This collection of sketches is built of snippets from the lives of people who count as milestones in Nicolson's own. He was clearly inspired by Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, a reference text for New Biography, the resemblance with which lies in the anecdotal 'involuntary memories'—to use Proust's term—that serve as a starting point for Nicolson's biographical accounts. The elements of fiction are an essential *motif* elaborately instilled into the narrative. The whole construction becomes an auto/biographical *roman à clef*—several subjects are public figures—which makes it quite a conundrum for his readers. This, precisely, is what creates the tension within the text. The narrative ends with a completely fictional episode in which Nicolson describes a tortuous trip to Iran in the company of an obnoxious American Behaviourist. The character was inspired by a lady Nicolson had simply spotted once on a boat. Just as in Sartre's *La Nausée*, written few years later, the underlying message is that all biography necessarily leads to autobiography, which in turn necessarily leads to fiction.

Nicolson's *Some People* also proved to be a catalyser for New Biography. The text convinced Woolf that something special was going on in life-writing, giving it new momentum, and the enthusiasm Woolf expressed for Nicolson's text was unprecedented. Nicolson had, she claimed, attained some sort of ideal for biography: he was the new Boswell.¹⁴ This open fervour about Nicolson's work was a recent phenomenon, for Nicolson's first encounters with Bloomsbury had been difficult. Bloomsbury was allergic to aristocracy and Nicolson was overtly proud of his rank. Reclusive and exclusive as Bloomsbury was, Lytton Strachey and Virginia Woolf loathed imitators and, back in 1923, they considered Nicolson to be no more than that. Upon reading Nicolson's second biography, *Tennyson*, Virginia wrote to Strachey's mother telling her she had had to put the book down in disgust and to 'purify myself I said that at once I would write a letter to Pernel. [...] Of course, he's [Harold Nicolson] due to Lytton [...] What these skilful imitators don't realise is that it is absolutely essential, if you are going to...' ¹⁵; the sentence breaks off here, uncompleted. As for Lytton Strachey, he had declined to review *Tennyson* for the *Nation and Athenaeum*. 'I'm sorry to say I can't face Lord Tennyson,' he wrote to Maynard Keynes who had made the request. 'Harold Nicolson's book is so disgusting and stupid.'¹⁶ At that time, Woolf still did not know what to make of Nicolson's mirroring effect. After reading *Byron*, Nicolson's following biography, she wrote to Strachey: 'Byron seems to me tawdry and melodramatic. And Claire & Trelawny and so on and so on—I conceive them like a cave at some Earl's court exhibition—a grotto I mean lined with distorting mirrors and plasters with oyster shells. Do not trouble to unwind this metaphor.'¹⁷ Woolf was soon to revise her opinion and the Hogarth Press even offered to publish their own

¹⁴ The Boswellian epoch represents a golden age for New Biography. See Woolf's essay 'The New Biography.' Let it be noted, here, that Boswell's papers had only recently been discovered, bringing him back to the foreground of life-writing.

¹⁵ Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (eds.), vol. 3 (1923-1928), London and New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977, p. 62.

¹⁶ James Lees-Milnes, *Harold Nicolson: Volume One 1886-1929*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1987, p. 202.

¹⁷ Woolf, Virginia and Lytton Strachey, *Letters of Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1956, p. 149.

edition of *Byron*, which Nicolson declined. They did however publish, in a pamphlet, his sketch of the landlady of Nicolson's student days in Paris, *Jeanne de Hénaut*, which would later become one of *Some People's* nine chapters.¹⁸

Considering the reasons for the clash with Bloomsbury's biographers in 1923, it is true that many elements in Nicolson's introduction to *Tennyson* clearly refer to Strachey's manifesto contained in the preface in his composite biography *Eminent Victorians*, in which Strachey famously wrote: 'If he [the Historian] is wise, he will adopt a subtler strategy [than his Victorian predecessors]. He will attack his subject in unexpected places; he will fall upon the flank, or the rear; he will shoot a sudden light into obscure recesses.'¹⁹ In similitude, Nicolson writes the following in his introduction to the bard's life: 'The Tennysonian laurels have grown by now into vast thickets, dusty, cumbersome and unvisited. It is necessary to let in the sun.'²⁰ This may have been the moment both Strachey and Woolf decided to put Nicolson's book down. However, it seems to me that Nicolson's introduction goes further in terms of its reflections on biography and historiography. Nicolson explains the reasons why Tennyson needs to be re-written: to be made accessible to the modern generation which can no longer accept Tennyson as 'the bard.' He emphasises the importance of the environment in understanding a writer, praising Taine's view that Tennyson was but a product of his time. He also believes there is not one historical truth, but rather any number of historical perspectives—and he lists a few of these with their very divergent conclusions. These considerations on the diversity of perspectives in history have no novelty for the dwellers of the postmodern age; but Nicolson's ideas must be placed in their own context if we are to assess the originality of his contribution to modernizing historiography.

In 1928, Nicolson set down his theoretical principles in *The Development of English Biography* (significantly published by the Hogarth Press, owned by Leonard and Virginia Woolf, as part of their *Literature Series*). The book stands as the first full-length study of biography written by a modernist writer.²¹ According to Nicolson, biography is as much history as it is literature. History gives truth. The aim of biography, then, is to provide a truthful record of an individual through the art of literature. This leads to his idea of 'pure' and 'impure' biography: the 'pure' achieves this truth and the 'impure' wanders off into the realm of fiction; but it is also 'impure' if the biographer's intent strays away from the one desire to seek out the truth about the subject. This was the case with moralising hagiography and nationalistic hero-worship—both characteristic of the Victorian age. Autobiography, in Nicolson's terms, can never be 'pure' because of its ineluctable fictionalized aspects. Most of all, 'pure biography' should not only give fact; it must, above all, give experience to the reader. A decade later, Woolf was to develop a similar concept, central to her theory of biography: the 'creative fact.'²²

¹⁸ Claire Battershill, 'Biography and Autobiography at the Hogarth Press', Thesis, n.p., 2012, p. 13, [tspace.library.utoronto.ca.](http://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/), 11 November 2015.

¹⁹ Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* [1918], n.p, The Perfect Library, 2013, Kindle format, l. 9244.

²⁰ H. Nicolson, *Tennyson: Aspects of his Life, Character and Poetry* [1923], London, Constable, 1925, p. 6.

²¹ Battershill, 'Biography and Autobiography at the Hogarth Press,' *op. cit.*, p. 87.

²² 'The Art of Biography,' *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*, Prague, e-artnow ebooks, 2013, l. 2162.

This leads to the question of biography's relation to the art of literature. The Russian literary critic and Formalist Victor Shklovsky started developing his theories on the role of literature as art as early as the 1910s. He considered art as being the 'renewal of form,' in which singling out a common object in an unfamiliar way enables us to recover our vision of it.²³ This is what he calls 'defamiliarisation' or 'ostranenie.'²⁴ In his introduction to *Tennyson* (1923), Nicolson's formulation is similar: when dealing with a subject, the biographer needs to create 'a shock of sudden and delighted surprise.' Nicolson had often written biographies of previously biographized subjects, but each time providing an original perspective, so as to open our eyes on the subject, in a different way. As for Nicolson's 'pure' biography—which is art—'There must be a result for the reader, an active, not merely a passive adjustment of sympathy; there must result for him an acquisition not of facts only but of experience.' Following this thread, we can consider 'defamiliarisation' or 'estrangement' as a reader-oriented strategy in that it aims at getting the truth ~~through~~ by the means of experience: the subject is revealed to the reader in an unexpected and powerful way; it becomes an instance of recognition²⁵ and even of revelation. Moreover, according to Shklovsky, the realisation of the process having led to the artistic creation is part of the reader's experience. In *Tennyson*, Nicolson states something quite equivalent when he writes: 'There must finally be a consciousness of creation, a conviction that some creative mind has selected and composed these facts in such a manner as to give to them a convincing interpretation.'²⁶

Nicolson's *Byron: The Last Journey*, published in 1924, is a good example of defamiliarisation. It deconstructs the myth of Byron as being the ever young and seductive romantic poet, the courageous hero in the Greek war of independence. Here, the narrative starts with Byron in his mid-thirties, living in Ravenna, embourgeoisé and over-fed. Poetry is a thing of the past. He is even caught complaining to his military companion, Edward John Trelawny: 'Do people think I have no lucid intervals, that I came to Greece to scribble more nonsense? [...] I wish I had never written a line, to have it cast in my teeth at every turn.'²⁷ This perspective challenges the conventional vision of the bard. Concerning his sources, Nicolson acknowledges that most of the material he used had previously been collected by Edgcumbe, in his biography *Byron the Last Phase* (1909). Edgcumbe was a museum curator and the facts in his biography seem to be laid out like a stamp collection in an album; the reader is left to rummage through the 'amorphous mass,' to use Woolf's trope for Victorian biography.²⁸ Nicolson constructs a narrative which allows us to understand Byron's acute awareness that he was heading towards his own death, and he resigned himself to it in an act of self-sacrifice, for the sake of the Greek independence movement. Nicolson writes in his preface, 'Lord Byron accomplished nothing at Missolonghi except his own suicide; but

²³ Shklovsky, Viktor, *Literature and Cinematography*, trans. Irina Masinovsky, Champaign, Dalkey Archive Press, 2008, p. 13.

²⁴ Shklovsky writes in *Literature and Cinematography*: 'in order to make an object into a fact of broad art, it has to be extracted from the quantity of facts of life,' p. 13.

²⁵ William H. Epstein makes this point in his study, *Recognizing Biography*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987.

²⁶ H. Nicolson, *Tennyson*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

²⁷ H. Nicolson, *Byron: The Last Journey* [1924], London, Prion Books, 1999, p. 113.

²⁸ Woolf, 'The New Biography,' *op. cit.*, p. 153.

by that single act of heroism he secured the liberation of Greece.²⁹ So aware is Byron of the fate which lies in store for him, that he constantly delays and procrastinates his departure, and then his arrival at Missolonghi. A living legend, Byron is greeted as a demi-God, the news of his arrival spreads like fire and people ‘flock’ to see him and his companions, who are seven in number. The metaphysical character of his mission is expressed in his seeming indifference regarding what was actually going on in Greece. Resembling Christ’s, Byron’s mission is to save the Greeks from themselves: ‘no good is to be done for these rascally Greeks, [...] I am sure to be deceived, disgusted, and all the rest of it. It may be so; but it is chiefly to satisfy myself upon this very point that I am going. I go prepared for anything, expecting a deal of roguery and imposition, but hoping to do some good.’³⁰ At one point in the narrative, Byron comes back from an overnight retreat on his boat, leaving his companions to look for him. Nicolson quotes from one of their journals:

At that moment, I happened to be standing at the window, and saw the object of our anxiety in the act of landing on the beach, about ten or a dozen yards from the house, to which he walked slowly up. He looked like a man under sentence of death, or returning from a funeral of all that he held dear on earth. His person seemed shrunk, his face was pale, and his eyes languid and fixed on the ground.³¹

In Nicolson’s account, he is depicted as lacking the traits of a military leader, tending to adopt a non-committal, ‘if somewhat languid attitude’ in the face of all the clamorous solicitations.³²

‘Have you read any of the late publications on Greece?’ [a companion] asked.
‘I never read any accounts of a country to which I can myself go,’ said he. ‘The Committee have sent me some of their “Crown and Anchor” reports, but I can make nothing of them.’³³

The power of his action derived *in fine* from his being an icon, which Byron nurtured for instance by paying special heed to his appearance, clad in his majestic cloaks and observing his distinguished dandyish style. The London Committee, who had sent Byron on this mission, blatantly exploited this: a member of the committee wrote to Byron of ‘the importance of your Lordship’s presence in Greece—for the sake of the Greeks, for the sake of the committee, and on every account. The knowledge of your presence there will increase our funds and our influence at home and abroad. People will have a confidence in the cause itself, and in the appropriation of whatever they will give to the cause.’ Byron understood it and agreed to embody his icon image, soon to become martyred. Through Nicolson’s construction, meaning is revealed: in Shklovsky’s words, the process of perception has an aesthetic end to it; this is what enables Nicolson to project this particularly morbid representation of Byron on his final

²⁹ H. Nicolson, *Byron, op. cit.*, p. viii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 121.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

journey towards his death in Missolonghi as akin to Christ's last journey back to Jerusalem.

Nicolson occupied the foreground of the experimental modes of life-writing in the 1920s and 1930s, a period during which he also wrote the lives of Swinburne, of his father, Sir Arthur Nicolson, 'First Lord Carnock,' of Lord Curzon, and of the American Dwight Morrow. His work was singled out by Virginia Woolf who acknowledged him to be a leading figure of New Biography. He produced biography, theorised and interacted with other new biographers such as Strachey, Woolf and Maurois, creating a new dynamism which led biography to become accepted as a form of literary art, thus liberating it from the Victorian constraints which came to be seen as a restriction of biography—and history generally—to the domain of natural sciences. In doing so, not only did Nicolson revolutionise the reader's experience of biography, he played a substantial part in modernising the historiography of his time.

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