

THE SPHYNX OF SAN COSME: A HISTORIAN'S THOUGHTS ON WRITING A BIOGRAPHY

LA ESFINGE DE SAN COSME:

PENSAMIENTOS DE UN HISTORIADOR AL ESCRIBIR UNA BIOGRAFÍA

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Abstract

This essay is drawn from the author's experience researching and writing a biography of Lucas Alamán (1792-1853). The author recounts the path he followed leading him, as a historian, to tackle the genre of biography, and some of the frustrations he encountered in choosing to write a biographical study of Alamán, a particularly opaque personality. The importance and pleasure of writing and reading biography in general is discussed, different frameworks for the writing of biography are proposed (one of the most promising, but riskiest, being that of psychohistory), sources of different sorts are analyzed, and narrative strategies addressed.

Keywords: *Psychohistory; Sources; Unreliable Narrator; Memorias; Alamán.*

Resumen

Este ensayo se extrae de la experiencia del autor al investigar y escribir una biografía de Lucas Alamán (1792-1853). El autor relata el camino que siguió para abordar, como historiador, el género de la biografía, y algunas de las frustraciones que encontró al optar por escribir un estudio biográfico de Alamán, una personalidad particularmente opaca. Se discute la importancia y el placer de escribir y leer biografías en general, se proponen diferentes marcos para la escritura de biografías (uno de los más prometedores, pero más riesgosos, es el de la psicohistoria), se analizan fuentes de diferentes tipos y estrategias narrativas.

Palabras clave: *Psicohistoria; Fuentes; Narrador no Fidedigno; Memorias; Alamán.*

After a man's long work is over and the sound of his voice is still, those in whose regard he has held a high place find his image strangely simplified and summarized. The hand of death, passing over it, has smoothed the folds, made it more typical and general. The figure retained by memory is compressed and intensified; it stands, sharply, for a few estimated and cherished things, rather than, nebulously, for a swarm of possibilities.

HENRY JAMES

The writing of lives is a department of history and is closely related to the discoveries of history. It can claim the same skills. No lives are led outside history or society; they take place in human time. No biography is complete unless it reveals the individual within history, within an ethos and a social complex.

HENRY JAMES¹

[T]hose that write lives, by reason they insist more on counsels than events, more upon what sallies from within, than upon what happens without, are the most proper for my reading; and therefore, above all others, Plutarch is the man for me...I am equally curious to know the lives and fortunes of these great instructors of the world, as to know the diversities of their doctrines and opinions.

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE²

An Inventory

About a month after Lucas Alamán's death on 2 June 1853 the architect and civil engineer Manuel Gargollo y Parra carried out an inventory and appraisal of the Alamán family home at 23 Ribera de San Cosme, in what was then the northwestern edge of Mexico City, since engulfed by the urban sprawl of the Mexican capital.³ From

¹ Both passages by James are quoted in *Writing Lives: Principia Biographica* (Edel, 1984:14; 43-44). Edel (1907-1997) was the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of a five-volume biography of the novelist Henry James (1843-1916), and of other books on James as well as critical works. A few passages in this essay are adapted from Eric Van Young, "Adventures with Don Luquitas: Exploring Our Obligations as Biographers," *The Americas*, 75:3 (July 2018), 453-462.

² From the essay "On Books" by Montaigne (1533-1592), quoted in *A Higher Form of Cannibalism?: Adventures in the Art and Politics of Biography* (Rollyson, 2005:50), Rollyson himself has written numerous biographies on figures ranging from William Faulkner (2020) to Marilyn Monroe (2014), and from Marie Curie (2004) to Norman Mailer (1991), as well as many works on the craft of biography itself.

³ Gargollo y Parra (whose dates I have been unable to determine) was the author of works on architecture and co-authored a work on Mexico's public debt to Spain. The inven-

tory touched only the buildings, garden, and orchard on the property, not the contents of the house, and was much more detailed than the summary I present here. It is indicative of the gaps in personal biographical data on Lucas Alamán that although his family had occupied the extensive Ribera de San Cosme property for a considerable time, in the years immediately preceding his death the family had apparently moved back into a more centrally located home in the city's Sagrario parish, probably on the Calle de San Francisco, where Alamán had earlier sold another home. The San Cosme property actually belonged to Lucas's widow Narcisca Castrillo de Alamán (1804-1859) by right of her dowry.

the roof of this house in the fall of 1847 Alamán had been able to observe the battles between invading American forces and the defenders of Mexico City. He wrote that the Americans had placed two cannon on the roof, thus making of the building a perfect target for the defending Mexican artillery and causing considerable damage to it (Van Young, 2021: 607).

The main house was very large, the two stories laid out in traditional form around a central patio with twenty-one rooms in the residential part on the second floor, occupied at one time by the large family, and a *mirador* above. There were several ancillary buildings, including stables, a *casa de vecindad* with ten rooms, and other structures; the ground floor of the main house seems to have been occupied by some sort of commercial establishment as was typical of such large family homes in the period. The "jardín grande" had nearly sixty fruit trees, forty large pines, and ten poplars. An enormous orchard on the property had a further 350 fruit trees, 78 mature cedars, and a variety of flowering plants and bushes. The total value of all this Gargollo put at over 42,000 pesos, not among the most expensive of upper-class homes, but still very substantial. When she died six years later at the age of 54, Alamán's widow, Narcisca Castrillo de Alamán, possessed personal valuables including diamonds (of which one item was "un fistol de brillantes" evaluated at 500 pesos, which presumably had belonged to her late husband); gold jewelry; silver plate and other silver objects; and paintings (ten framed oils, of which eight were of Christian saints) for a total value of 2,615 pesos—certainly not a huge amount in personal valuables, but again, significant. The self-made inventory of his wealth by Alamán in 1841 in connection with the collapse of the enormous Cocolapan textile factory in Orizaba of which he had been managing partner; a detailed appraisal of his personal library shortly after his

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death; and his final testament of 1850 all add considerable detail to the picture we have of his wealth through time. The bottom line is that after deductions for his large outstanding debts Lucas Alamán's fortune amounted to 150,000-200,000 pesos at his death. He was a good deal less wealthy than he had been a decade or so earlier, although still a man of the small *novohispano* and Mexican upper class.⁴

I have mentioned all this by way of suggesting the distance between what a biographer might come to know of a subject's material life and that subject's internal life or even his or her daily routines. In this case the person's property is particularly well-documented since Lucas Alamán was a relatively wealthy man, a private entrepreneur of some ambition, a government official engaged for many years in the formation of economic policy, and the head of a large family, the economic wellbeing of whose children depended in part on inheritance possibilities. These inventories and appraisals by no means exhaust the sources describing Alamán's property, that of his family, and his business dealings since there is also an abundance of notary documents recording purchases and sales, invoices and receipts among his personal papers, litigation records, business and casual correspondence, and so forth. But although we can draw reasonable inferences about him from his property, such documentary remains tell us barely anything at all about his interior life or even how he lived out of the public spotlight focused on him for more than three decades. There is almost nothing in the way of family correspondence, for example, and since Lucas Alamán was often away from his wife and large family for extended periods on government or private business, and otherwise authored a vast business and political correspondence, one would have assumed that he wrote letters to his wife and adult children. But if he did, virtually none of these letters have

4 On the Alamán family and Lucas Alamán's life more generally, see (Van Young, 2021). The Gargollo appraisal of the San Cosme property appears as item 358B in the Lucas Alamán Papers (hereinafter BLAC-Alamán Papers), Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin; the 1859 appraisal of Narcisca Castrillo de Alamán's personal valuables is in BLAC-Alamán Papers, item 363; the 1841 inventory is in Centro de Estudios de Historia de México Carso (formerly Condumex) (hereinafter Carso), Lucas Alamán Papers, 22-1887; Alamán's testament of 1850 is analyzed in detail in Eric Van Young, "El testamento de Lucas Alamán de 1850," in (Silva and Álvarez, 2013: 101-109).

survived, their fate unknown. It was only by serendipity that I happened across Alamán's unfinished and unpublished *memorias* of 1833 (more on this below), which have proved a sort of Rosetta Stone for understanding Lucas Alamán's life. This was also used by José C. Valadés in his impressive, judicious, and even sympathetic 1938 biography of the statesman.⁵

The documents we do have, as I have said, tell us little about Lucas Alamán's personal or interior life. For example, since he was a man who seemed to tend toward corpulence, did he struggle with his weight in his later years? As one of the most active men in economic and public affairs of the time, how present was he in the domestic sphere of the Alamán-Castrillo household, and did this change over the course of his married life? What were his relations with his children; how did the deaths of several of them at tender ages affect him emotionally; and what was the nature of his marriage to Narcisca Castrillo?⁶ And what of his connections to his two-decade older half-brother, the child of his mother's first marriage, the high Church official Dr. Juan Bautista Arechederreta (sometimes de Arechederreta), a canon in the Mexico City cathedral and author of several works on institu-

5 Lucas Alamán, *Memorias y otros documentos*, edited, with an introduction and notes, by Eric Van Young and a concluding essay by Andrés Lira (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios Históricos, El Colegio de México, forthcoming); the original document of the *memorias* is in Carso, Fondo DCLXXIV, separate from the enormous collection of Alamán's papers; *Alamán: estadista e historiador* (Valadés, 1977); originally published in 1938 I characterize Valadés's biography as "even sympathetic" because as a man of the Left he might more naturally have painted Alamán in very dark colors, and as the reactionary he was not. Valadés had a collection of Alamán's papers in his private possession, frequently cited in his book, that I was unable to consult. It may be that biographical practice of the time, or authorial discretion and reticence on Valadés's part, prevented him from revealing anything more personal or surprising than what is contained in Alamán's publicly available papers, but I am inclined to doubt it.

6 Between 1824 and 1845, Narcisca Castrillo de Alamán bore eleven children (apart from at least one miscarriage). Six of these lived to adulthood, three died either as infants or very young children and one as a teenager; the fate of one more I have been unable to determine. The eldest child was a girl, Catalina, who became a nun and died in 1892; the next born, Gil (1825-1882), was a priest; the longest-lived of the children was the attorney Juan Ignacio (also known as Juan Bautista), his father's biographer, who was born in 1826 and died some brief time after 1900. Philippe Ariès famously suggested that in the early modern era infant mortality was so frequent that parents, although not indifferent, were less affected emotionally by the expectable deaths of babies and very young children than modern families because attachments had less time to form and may have been less invested in; see (Ariès, 1965).

tions of the Mexican Catholic Church? They had been estranged due to intra-family conflicts over inheritance issues, though after a rapprochement while Lucas was still an adolescent they became close for the last decades of the churchman's life—but what was the nature of the reconciliation and of the relationship the two developed? (Alamán, 1968; Arechederreta, 1927)⁷ How did he feel about his own father, the Spanish immigrant miner, mining financier (*aviador*), and merchant Juan Vicente Alamán (1747-1808), barely mentioned in his son's uncompleted and unpublished *memorias* of 1833 or his other writings, except to be described as a hard worker? His mother María Ignacia Escalada de Alamán, by contrast, was unambiguously praised by her son as one of the most beautiful women ever seen in Guanajuato, appears frequently in his autobiographical account, and was to play a major role in his life well into his maturity. What were Lucas Alamán's intimate thoughts and feelings about his religion? We know he was personally very pious and observant, as a young man joined the Third Order of Saint Francis (and must therefore have been interred in Franciscan habit at his death in 1853), was an ardent supporter of the Church politically, and believed it was the only social bond that held Mexicans together at a time when the claims of the "imagined community" were still very weak among them (Anderson, 2006). When the large Alamán family lived on the Ribera de San Cosme did don Lucas stroll contemplatively in the vast gardens and orchard of the property? We may suppose so but do not know. And although we know that he wrote standing at a desk (because Guillermo Prieto tells us so), what hours did he keep as he composed his monumental *Historia de Méjico* in the final years of his life, and what were his other work habits? (Prieto, 1906). What were his feelings about the three major less-than-successful private entrepreneurial projects that in his last years came to shadow him with a large debt overhang, and at his death in 1853 left him a poorer man than he had been at the age of fifty or so? These included his involvement with British mining investments in Mexico in the

⁷ Alamán leaned heavily in writing his *Historia de Méjico* on his elder brother's unpublished notebooks chronicling events of the 1810 insurrection in a very anodyne, schematic way, which Alamán nonetheless found extremely valuable and praised for their author's objectivity.

1820s, his purchase and later sale of a hacienda in the Celaya region of which his hopes for it as an income-producing property had been hugely disappointed, and the resounding failure of an enormous textile enterprise he managed in the Orizaba area in the late 1830s and early 1840s. We may suppose these failures provoked disappointment in him, disillusion, or even bitterness; he offers hints about this but never any revealing insights as to his thinking.

The object of this essay is not to provide a thumbnail biography of the great statesman-historian, and still less to answer the questions I have just posed or a host of others that might be asked, but to use the two decades of research I have done on his life to discuss some general questions about the writing of biography while offering some reflections on my own experience as a historian (temporarily) turned biographer.

Why Biography?

Why do we write biographies, anyway, and why do people read them? One reason among many is simple curiosity about the lives of the famous and infamous. A biography can be like a good detective story, and while an interest in the details of someone else's life is not necessarily morbid, we do love the gossipy aspects. Especially if we already know the general shape of the life-course, we hope to experience the *frisson* of revelation and surprise at points of inflection in the narrative. Then there is the inherent interest that some people hold: great geniuses, great heroes, or great villains whose stories are told again and again. Did we really need a half-dozen or so biographies of Lawrence of Arabia to be convinced of his intelligence, bravery, and tortured personality, or yet another of Leonardo da Vinci to acknowledge his genius?; apparently so. Biographies also help us to make sense of our own lives as we follow a more or less organized narrative through the life stages we may not be able clearly to discern in ourselves, giving us names for them and comparative metrics by which to judge our own advance, accomplishment, or failings. Yet another reason for writing and reading biography lies in its instrumental value: the life story of some extraordinary human being, or of an ordinary person in extraordinary circumstances, may reveal how things got

to be the way they are, and in some cases even how the curve of the future might be bent in one direction or another. Relatedly, biography is also the vehicle of remembrance—a particularly vivid way of not forgetting chunks of the past, of our common history, and thereby working against the impoverishment of universal human experience. My own motives for embarking on a two-decade project (as it turned out) of biographical research and writing conflate most of these.

Biography as a sub-genre of academic history writing once reigned, if not supreme, then at least co-equal with diplomatic and political history. Changing fashions (for example, the onrushing current of cultural history from the 1960s or so); the internal logic of research and interpretation, which on one end of the focus continuum has nourished greater granularity and on the other “big history;” and the leakage from other intellectual disciplines—these trends have all pushed biography by academic historians aside not as exhausted, exactly, since there are always more lives to chronicle, but as old-fashioned “great man (or woman) history”. This happened even as the craft of life-writing, and of its solipsistic sister autobiography, flourished outside the walls of academia and continued to attract readers as they had always done. This creaky old genre still has a lot of juice in it and may be making a comeback among academic historians, however, as the essays in this collection and recent works by a number of professional historians suggest.

A brief word about how I came to write a biography may throw light on some of my observations about such a project, and my frustrations with the process. I began my professional life as an economic historian and then moved on to study the Mexican Independence movement primarily as social and cultural history. In the latter research I became increasingly interested in the interiority of the historical actors I was studying. Although I felt it plausible with the abundant primary documentary materials at hand to make some statements about religious, political, and community culture, I felt I could never quite penetrate to the motives that placed any given insurgent in the line of fire at any given moment. The more intimate mental processes of Indigenous peasants and other insurgents remained inaccessible to me, their mental lives

almost entirely opaque. I wanted to know their thought processes, not just as exemplars of the *mentalité* of certain groups formed by cultural environments, social forces, and historical experience, but the particular and idiosyncratic mental world of individuals and how this interacted with broader currents to produce action—choices regarding political violence, regime loyalty, passivity, criminality (Van Young, 2012).⁸ With overwhelmingly illiterate people this was a vain hope. Apart from relatively rare statements about circumstance and motive, many of which were suspect because of peoples’ desire to exculpate themselves before the military and judicial authorities to evade punishment, they are documented almost exclusively as objects. They figure in trial proceedings, criminal records, the reports from the field of royalist officers or the observations of other individuals who could write, and so forth, although one catches occasional glimpses of individuals’ cognitive and emotional processes.

In the face of this frustration it occurred to me that a study of the insane, based upon clinical observations and interpretations of mentally ill people by trained physicians, due to the richness of the documentation might furnish materials for an intimate access to the sort of interiority *within a specific historical context* that I was interested in exploring, albeit for people at the fringes of the accepted mental norms of their era. I should make clear that it was not necessarily the aberrations of the “normal” psychology of individuals that concerned me one way or another, but the interiority itself. Then again, apart from the inherent interest in the disturbed minds of the most floridly mad, this would obviously involve some sophisticated reverse engineering to see how individual asylum patients (internees,

⁸ For some outstanding examples in the history of early modern Europe in which such interiority is explored, see *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Davis, 1987); *I, Pierre Rivière, Having Slaughtered My Mother, My Sister, and my Brother...: A Case of Parricide in the 19th Century* (Foucault, 1975); and *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, translated by John Tedeschi (Ginzburg, 1980). Foucault’s *Pierre Rivière* comes closest to the sort of biography I had in mind; Ginzburg’s and Davis’s books, although they have strongly biographical elements, were written respectively to explore early modern non-Church-sanctioned cosmological-theological beliefs on the part of ordinary people, and to unearth attitudes about state power, the justice system, and techniques of legal evasion in absolutist France. Foucault’s and Ginzburg’s books depended on happy archival accidents, the survival of idiosyncratically detailed legal records.

really, since there was little in the way of clinical intervention at the time and place I chose to study, although therapeutic ones such as water treatments were applied) arrived at their condition, their psychiatric and medical histories, the content of their delusional structures, if any, and other aspects of their internal lives. But after some preliminary research in the archives of the Castañeda Insane Asylum in Mexico City embracing the period 1910-1930 or so and with the initial plan to carry the research back into the later colonial period, I abandoned this project for various reasons.⁹

A fork in the road of my research thus brought me to biography as a more plausible entry point to an intimate portrait of an historical actor. I settled on Lucas Alamán because in doing my work on Mexican Independence I was familiar with his magisterial *Historia de Méjico*, I had become interested in the roots of Mexican conservatism, and I was curious about the political history of the country during the early republican era. The irony in choosing to research the biography of an elite political actor, of course, is that it did not get me any closer to the mental lives of the common people whose actions during the insurgency of 1810-1821 had initially spurred my interest in the question of interiority. And little did I suspect in settling on Alamán that I had selected a very reserved, unself-revealing personality; there is very little in the way of his intimate personal papers except for the 1833 *memorias*. So, while the public man is amply, indeed exhaustively documented because of his high political profile, the private man is not. One of my principal frustrations with the biography I eventually published is that except for what I considered conservative speculation based upon written evidence, I was not able to penetrate very far into his personality—that is, his interior emotional and cognitive life as opposed to the self-presentation he fashioned for others. While Lucas Alamán was not exactly a sphynx, he might as well have been for all the self-revelation he offered the world.

9 The one rather slim publication I harvested from this research was the article "Ascenso y caída de una loca utopía: Estudio introductorio", in "Para una historia de la psiquiatría en México," special number of *Secuencia: Revista de historia y ciencias sociales*, (Van Young, 2001: 11-29). An expanded version is "Ascenso y caída de una loca utopía: El Manicomio General en la Ciudad de México a comienzos del siglo XX," (Van Young, 2005: 253-273).

On the other hand, it has never become clear to me whether Alamán was *particularly* unself-revealing compared with other public figures of his time. He himself observed in the introductory passage of his 1833 *memorias* that the tradition of memoir and autobiography, or even the keeping of journals, was not developed in the Hispanophone world in contrast with Britain and France. And in general, despite the centrality of the individual personality in both the Romantic and Liberal intellectual-artistic currents, public figures of the time did not go around spilling their guts as modern memoirists and autobiographers do, maintaining a clearer barrier between their public and private lives. So it may be that my hopes to penetrate Lucas Alamán's interior world were thwarted because my expectations were misplaced. I would, however, maintain the position that at the very least he was notably guarded and unself-revealing as a personality.

Biography and History

The process of writing a biography is familiar to writers of history, and as Henry James wrote in the second epigraph above may even be seen as a sub-genre of that discipline (professional biographers might dispute this); or at least the two forms are deeply entangled. Most historians, I would venture to say, write mini-biographies of the women and men who populate the worlds they portray.¹⁰ The problem for the historian who tunnels under the wall that divides the two pursuits (in the United States, for example, Pulitzer Prizes are every year awarded separately in both history and biography, and bookstores will often have distinct sections devoted to each) is that of upscaling from the mini-biography—a few sentences, paragraphs, or even a book chapter or journal article—to a long-format, book-length study. As a professional historian who has written in the modes of economic history and then in social-cultural history, I must confess that I have

10 In the course of their work they may well encounter figures whom they feel warrant additional treatment over and above the few paragraphs or pages integrated into their historical narrative, but not in the extended format of a book. Two of my own efforts of this in essay form are the articles "Millennium on the Northern Marches: The Mad Messiah of Durango and Popular Rebellion in Mexico, 1800-1815", (Van Young, 1986: 385-413); and "El sociópata: Agustín Marroquín", (Van Young, 1992: 219-253).

found little difference between working in those forms and writing a life. The focus, scale, and themes are different, of course, but the process is much the same. (There is a major sub-genre of biography, of course: the literary biography, which perhaps stands in relation to biography more generally as dentistry does to medicine—no disrespect intended.)

The most basic elements shared by history- and life-writing are the centrality of the passage of time and an organizing observer (an author) to represent it. This is one way to define the narrative process; that is, the arrangement of sequential actions/happenings over time, organized according to some principle of priority—what to include, what to leave aside—out of the chaos of life, the buzz of reality. Both are basically forms of puppetry, history typically more distanced and Olympian in viewpoint, biography more like ventriloquism, but both require interpretive intervention on the part of the writer, the observer doing the organizing. Many educated readers of historical works think that the “history” of a time and place is simply waiting to be discovered, that all the historian need do is scrape away the dead leaves and detritus covering it and —voilà!— there it is to be inscribed on paper. A more sophisticated view is that writing history is more like assembling a jigsaw puzzle: there are many pieces, but they fit together in a predetermined pattern to make a coherent image. My own experience in writing economic, social, and cultural history is that the process is more like creating a mosaic image from many uniform pieces of glass or stone—the only vaguely determinative factor is color, and the assemblage may take any number of forms (within limits, of course) depending upon the goals, presuppositions, and methodological inclinations of the writer. On the other hand, I reasoned, a biography has a clear linear narrative, a path for the writer to follow laid out by the subject’s life from birth to death, or points in between, even though the path might be obscured because over-grown with weeds or might disappear altogether only to re-emerge later on. The clarity, breadth, and direction of the path, and therefore the coherence of the narrative and the revelatory value of the biography, depend upon the documentation of the life, of course —the sources, whether written or in other mediums, or oral accounts by those

who know or knew the biographee— left by the subject her/himself, and/or by others. The further back in time the subject lived, if beyond the reach of one or two lives, the more the entire enterprise depends upon the accidental survival of paper or other material artifacts. But by no means does the story tell itself.

Frameworks

The Greek mathematician Archimedes (287-212 B.C.) is credited with saying “Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it and I shall move the world”. What the biographer needs is leverage —the capacity, in other words, inherent as much in the imaginative force of the biographer himself as in the sources, to extract as much information as possible out of a given source, resistant though it may be; to move the subject’s life, as it were, with the most effective instrument.¹¹ The biographer’s ability to do this depends upon the degree of inferential freedom he allows himself. Inferences about a subject’s life, especially her/his interior life, are typically informed by some implicit or explicit conceptual arsenal, or a theory if one wishes to elevate the process. The concept applied is the lever used to lift the meaning of an historical actor’s life out of the morass of happenstance, contradiction, and conflicting opinions about the subject. To extend the Archimedian trope a bit further, if the lever is too long—that is, if the structure of inference is too far removed in cultural or historical terms from the object, the lever is quite likely to snap and leave an implausible scramble of results. Since “meaning” is a relational property in which one thing is explicated in terms of another, the concepts applied are typically relational ones.

Three frameworks that immediately come to mind of a number of possibilities are the aesthetic, Marxian, and psychobiographical (a sub-sub-genre, if you will), none of them mutually exclusive, although even when combined one would be given priority over the others. Most rarefied of these (and perhaps frailest in its interpretive leverage) is the aesthetic, as those personalities to whom it might be applied would certainly claim for themselves, since it is a highly

¹¹ To avoid awkward repetition, from this point on “himself” is understood as a proxy for “himself/herself”.

elitist attitude and life-style. Oscar Wilde, for example, is said to have lived his life as though it were itself a work of art: his predilections, self-presentation, and philosophy, not to mention his works (for example, his famous essay “The Critic as Artist: With Some Remarks on the Importance of Doing Nothing” [1891]) all point in this direction.¹² The Marxian framework has produced some major works in biography, as for example Isaac Deutscher’s (1907-1967) three volumes (1954-1963) on the life of Leon Trotsky. There is information of a personal nature about its subject in this sprawling work, but the primary driver of the narrative is the life of a great political figure within a specifically communist revolutionary context—a work about a Marxist by a Marxist. I find this to be reductionistic to an extreme degree since in this framework individual thought and action are in large measure (not entirely, to be sure) reduced to social forces determined by the relations of production, or in this case at a remove in a massive political upheaval ostensibly fueled by the logical outcome of conflicting forces rooted in those relations. My good friend, the late Argentine economic historian Juan Carlos Garavaglia, who taught in Mexico for a number of years, left me with a number of fond memories, among which was the aphoristic injunction to remember that “people have psychologies as well as sociologies”.

This brings me to the question of the psychobiographical framework for biography, to which I devote somewhat more space here since I find it the most interesting, albeit the most risky, and it is closest to my own preoccupations as a biographer. The psychobiographical framework is less of a straitjacket in writing a life than the Marxian approach, for example, since it is specifically geared toward understanding individuals, the objective of biographical writing, rather than laying out broad historical generalizations as instantiated in the life of a single person. But in its many possible degrees of interpretive freedom also lie a great deal of risk, that of over-interpretation in the service of a decidedly slippery psychological model. As an explicitly identified

sub-genre of biography (which may itself, as Henry James asserted, be viewed as a sub-genre of history) this dates from the works of Sigmund Freud and obviously employs psychoanalytic concepts (although other psychological models have been applied) to plumb the depths of historical actors’ minds and motivations. It is a tool that can have either a blunt or finely honed edge; that is to say, the conditions of its applicability and the subtlety of its application, and therefore the degree of its credibility, have varied widely. It has always seemed to me a very promising approach that has produced very mixed results, demonstrating its “idiosyncratic nature” (Kushner, 1993:20).¹³ There are a number of problems with this framework, of which I mention only three here. The first is the proposition that psychoanalytic models of psychological structure and function are transhistorical and transcultural—that they apply equally well to all cultures at all times in history, a problematic assumption. The second problem is that a knowledge paradigm developed and mostly applied in a clinical setting in which a dialogic process between patient and clinician is absolutely essential to the efficacy of treatment, is often applied to a dead subject who cannot answer back, elucidate, or progress emotionally; when it’s a live subject the published analysis becomes a *fait accompli* of which discussion may produce more heat than light. This is not exactly a static situation, since the biographer, try to avoid it though he might, will almost certainly paste some emotional projections of his own onto the subject of the study.¹⁴ But the biographee cannot object or

¹³ While principally a critique of Erik Erikson’s psychobiographical study of Martin Luther, this article also contains useful comments in criticism of psychohistory more broadly. ¹⁴ For example, my own conclusion that Lucas Alamán’s character may have tended toward the melancholy might well be a projection of my own personality onto his, although I have tried to think my way through this to find plausible evidence for it in the historical sources. The best counterweight to this sort of thing, obviously, is for the biographer to make his own emotional and intellectual characteristics as explicit to himself as possible (“possible” being the key word here). Related to this is the question of a positive or negative emotional attachment of biographer to biographee. Elizabeth Young-Bruehl (1946-2011), a psychoanalyst and the biographer of Hannah Arendt and Anna Freud, once referred to this as the “ich” (as in “icky”) factor—whether or not one likes the person one is writing about, and beyond this if they are even likable in any normal sense. The classic limiting case here is that of Adolf Hitler’s biographers, among Anglophone writers Alan Bullock and Ian Kershaw, for example, where predictable revulsion is overridden by the inherent historical importance of the subject.

¹² See the magnificent biography by the late Richard Ellman (1918-1987), *Oscar Wilde* (Ellman, 1987), posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize for biography in 1989. Ellman, also the author of a monumental biography of James Joyce, does not explicitly write that Wilde lived his life as a work of art, but it is a fair conclusion to judge from what he presents.

correct for this. And a third problem is that psychobiographical interpretations tend overwhelmingly to be directed at pathologies or abnormalities rather than talents or virtues.

There are, as I have mentioned, successes and failures within this framework, as there are with any such practice. Freud himself produced mixed results with his efforts in the field. His psychoanalytic interpretation of a childhood dream of Leonard da Vinci's famously went awry when he mistranslated the species of a bird that as a young child Leonardo dreamt to have landed at the rim of his crib and stuck its tail in his mouth. Freud translated the word for the bird as a vulture when it was described by its dreamer as a kite, thus greatly changing the meaning of the dream (Freud, 1957).¹⁵ While it is true that this mistake pertains to the translation of a single word and not to the method more generally, it does point to the fact that the interpretation of symbols on which much of psychobiographical interpretation often rests can be problematic. An even more famous misstep by the father of psychoanalysis is his questionable collaboration as an elderly eminence with the American diplomat William C. Bullitt on a psychobiography of President Woodrow Wilson, a project with a fascinating history of its own. Critics have insisted that Bullitt was working out his personal animus toward the former president for having dismissed him as an advisor during the Versailles Treaty talks in 1919. The book, in other words, has been seen by such critics as a vituperative hatchet-job motivated by a personal vendetta, in which the actual degree of Freud's collaboration has been a matter of considerable controversy (Freud and Bullitt, 1967; Campbell, 2008).¹⁶

¹⁵ In his short introduction to Sigmund Freud's "Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood [1910]", James Strachey is at some pains to minimize the effect of the mistake on the overall value of the essay.

¹⁶ According to Campbell, Freud agreed to collaborate with Bullitt on a larger-scale psychoanalytically informed biography because of his own dissatisfaction with the Leonardo essay. Controversy has swirled around the degree of the elderly Freud's co-authorship, with many critics of the book—among them Erik Erikson, Barbara Tuchman, and A.J.P. Taylor—condemning the book and questioning Freud's participation in the project. Erik H. Erikson in his review of the Freud-Bullitt collaboration, "The Strange Case of Freud, Bullitt, and Woodrow Wilson: I" (Erikson, 1967), described the book as "disastrously bad," but defended the validity (and his own practice) of psychoanalytically based psychobiography as "of concern to historians who do not wish to shirk the task of giving a considered account of the ambiguities of greatness". Bullitt (1891-1967) had an important but checkered diplomatic career, serving during the 1930s as the first U.S.

The point here is that psychohistorical studies generally, and psychobiographical works in particular, are peculiarly marked by a contradiction: while the theoretical parameters are well-defined and fairly strict, and the conceptual arsenal well understood, the interpretive leeway, not to say the inexactitude or incompleteness of the sources, can produce very floppy results. On the other hand, Freud's work on the psychopathology of the schizophrenic German judge Daniel Paul Schreber (1842-1911), based exclusively on a reading of Schreber's own book about his illness, was more successful, perhaps because Schreber was so palpably nuts and his description of his own symptoms so detailed (Schreber, 2020; Freud, 2003).¹⁷ And there have been some notable successes in the sub-genre of psychobiography, a fine example being John E. Mack's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1976 biography of T.E. Lawrence, in which the psychoanalytic concepts are applied with care and delicacy to produce a nuanced study (Mack, 1998).¹⁸

Where my own biographical work is concerned, I have been attracted by the psychobiographical approach, but in the grip of early enthusiasm for the method I may have flown too close to the sun.¹⁹ In dealing with the life of Lucas Alamán, I promised myself at the outset that even were I to encounter sufficient sources to invite psychobiographical interpretations (which I

ambassador to the Soviet Union, and then as envoy to Great Britain. Interestingly, he was first married to Louise Bryant, the widow of American journalist and communist John Reed, and later engaged for a time to Missy LeHand, Franklin D. Roosevelt's devoted personal secretary.

¹⁷ Many other people have written on Schreber, including Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Elias Canetti, and Jacques Lacan. Both Schreber's account of his own illness (he spent his final years in a Leipzig insane asylum) and Freud's long essay make for fascinating reading; the Freud interpretation has spurred considerable debate.

¹⁸ Mack (1929-2004) was a professor of psychiatry at Harvard University. Much has been written by scholars about the psychohistorical approach to biography, and even to the collective psychology of large groups and social movements. Among valuable collections of essays on the theme are Erik H. Erikson, *Life History and the Historical Moment* (Erikson, 1975); Peter J. Loewenberg, *Decoding the Past: The Psychohistorical Approach* (Loewenberg, 1983); and William McKinley Runyan, *Psychology and Historical Interpretation* (McKinley, 1988).

¹⁹ For example, in my treatment of the central figure, a clearly mentally disturbed Indigenous man in the years before the outbreak of the 1810 insurgency, in Van Young, "Millennium on the Northern Marches;" and there are some brief psychological speculations about the Mexican insurgency as a collective movement in my book *La otra rebelión* that, while I would not disavow them, I think might have been stated a bit more tentatively, as playful suggestions.

did not) I would distance myself from making assertions, limiting myself to suggestive observations and questions. When in his unpublished *memorias* of 1833 and some correspondence, for example, Alamán mentions his mother's unusual attractiveness and her other qualities while scarcely mentioning his father at all, and certainly with little emotional charge, an extravagant psychobiographical interpretation might have drawn conclusions about Oedipal tensions within the nuclear family and attempted to extend these into aspects of his adult life. Here the lever would have snapped from the weight of over-interpretation. So what I did was to stick close to the surface of the text, noting Alamán's obvious admiration and affection for his mother and a certain coolness—or if not coolness, blandness—toward his father, and leaving the conclusions to the reader.

In the end I believe that a skeptical, reasonable methodological eclecticism is the best approach to the writing of biography, characteristics that the best biographies, of which there are many examples, seem to display. Not adhering to a strict psychoanalytic agenda (or any other framework, for that matter) in biographical writing may cost a work some methodological edge, but gains for it flexibility and accessibility. The Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of J. Robert Oppenheimer by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin does not shy away from the subject's complicated psychology but handles it in common-sense terms comprehensible to any educated layman. The same is true of Edmund Morris's three-volume biography of Theodore Roosevelt (Bird and Sherwin, 2005; Morris, 2010).

Neither of these works is psychobiography as such but still allow ample room for the psychological dimension of their subjects.

As with the question of how much detail in a biography is too much (discussed below), there arises here the question of how much psychologizing is too much. Unless it is handled judiciously, the "psycho" in psychobiography can land with a thud and turn out to be just as reductionist as an injudicious Marxian approach. This is a tendency of some of the writing on Oscar Wilde, for example, even of a masterful work such as Richard Ellman's. Studies of the Irish writer may over-emphasize Wilde's closeted homosexuality, since the scandal of his relation-

ship with the young English nobleman Lord Alfred Douglas, his trial, and his downfall was the cause célèbre of the late Victorian age. What is just as interesting about Wilde, of course, is that as an Irishman he was to a great degree an outsider looking in from the periphery, making his way in English society, successful at beating the English at their own literary and social games—up to a point. There are monumental biographical works that almost completely eschew efforts at plumbing the interior lives of their subjects, concentrating on their thinking, activities, and the historical context in which they lived and worked. Such a study is the biography of John Maynard Keynes by Robert Skidelsky, largely devoted to Keynes's economic ideas and the times in which these developed—a complex portrait of a major historical and intellectual figure without much in the way of psychological discussion at all (Skidelsky, 2005).²⁰

Sources

A casual encounter with a written source of some kind may even precede the choice of a subject for a biography; this was certainly the case with my research on Lucas Alamán since I read parts of his magisterial *Historia de Méjico* while working on the history of the Mexican independence movement and knew something of him from general reading on the early republican period in Mexico. As I have already noted, given my ambition to write a biography by way of penetrating the interior life of a subject rather than simply narrating and analyzing an event or historical epoch, it is ironic that I chose Lucas Alamán since as a personality he was reserved to the point of opacity. There are generic types of sources that many biographers use; a catalog of these would not serve my purposes here, but I will briefly mention a few. In the case of a person as intensely involved in national politics as Alamán, in both ministerial and other positions, there are bound to be government documents that illuminate his career: official correspondence; reports he either wrote himself or edited; government newspapers; documents related to his appointments, to his relations with the national congress, and the administration

²⁰ A one-volume reduction of the original three-volume work.

of his ministries, complaints against him from other public officials or private citizens, and so forth. Biographers will also often lean on press accounts of public events and the individuals involved in them, and for this period of Mexican history such sources have proved especially important to historians, as well. Although I used these, I did not rely much upon the effusions of the fourth estate since the journalistic conventions of the time dictated that stories in the major Mexico City and other newspapers (including those founded, financed, or written for by Alamán himself) tended to be anonymous, opinionated, and deeply slanted politically. In his case his massive private business correspondence turned out to be especially important in documenting his thinking and opinions since a certain casualness crept into it over decades in which some insights about the writer's personality and private life emerged.

These were primarily with a friend and business associate in Celaya, with his English business agents in London, and with the Neapolitan nobleman, the Duque de Terranova y Monteleone, for whom Alamán worked as factotum in Mexico over a quarter century in the management and liquidation of the numerous properties the Duque held as lineal descendant and heir of Hernán Cortés. There are also Alamán's own historical writings, principally his vast *Historia de Méjico* (5 vols., 1849-1852), in which there appear a few personal references, but which really are more important for grasping the tone of his mind.

One documentary source that I encountered unexpectedly is so specific to Alamán that I do not offer it here in the spirit of suggestion for other biographers, nor that of a general comment on the craft; but it warrants comment, nonetheless. This is the unfinished and unpublished memoir (cited in footnote 5 above) he began to write while he was in hiding in Mexico City during 1833-1834 to evade prosecution for his role in the judicial murder of Vicente Guerrero in early 1831 as well as other crimes alleged against him while he, Alamán, was principal minister in the Anastasio Bustamante government from 1830 to 1832. This was a period in which the practice of memoir writing in the Spanish world was not common, as I have noted above. Furthermore, he wrote that his *memorias* were not

intended for publication, so they constituted a sort of message in a bottle to his heirs and general posterity, and there is no reason to doubt his sincerity. Over the next fifteen years this spare autobiographical fragment of about thirty pages morphed into the history of Mexican independence for which he is known. Initially he meant to write in some detail of the Guanajuato of his youth, his childhood, his own family, the great mining families of Mexico more generally, and the social customs of late colonial Mexico. There is much valuable information about his family background and the social customs of the time, but he only got so far with these themes and then either changed his mind or ran out of time and never completed the *memorias*.²¹ Truncated though it is, his autobiographical text is a kind of Rosetta Stone with which to make some sense of Lucas Alamán's behavior. The tone of the text is elegiac, melancholy, and nostalgic. In it he recounts the decline of the family fortune, including the extinction of a noble title; the wealth taken from the silver mines of Guanajuato, as so many other colonial fortunes were, but lost through carelessness, fecklessness, bad luck, and excessive reproductive vigor over several generations.

It is my view that despite his clear and even prescient thinking about political economy, in his private investments he was pursuing not only material gain but was also trying to compensate for the sense of status loss he had experienced in the decline of his family from his grandparents' time to his own, which comes through clearly in this text. Lucas Alamán was even willing to over-leverage himself, as we would call it today, by assuming economic risks he could not cover and leaving others to hold the bag. Yet as far as I can tell, he was an honest official who never took bribes and never used his position as an insider to make a profit on government business.

²¹ A second chapter tantalizingly entitled "Antiguos costumbres de Guanajuato y de este país en general: opulencia y felicidad de que en él se gozaba. Algunas anécdotas particulares" was unfortunately never written. His pen was not idle during the fifteen months of his deep seclusion. He also wrote a long defense against the charges lodged against him in the Mexican congress: "Defensa del ex ministro de relaciones don Lucas Alamán: En la causa formada contra él y los ex ministros de Guerra y Justicia del vicepresidente don Anastasio Bustamante, con unas noticias preliminares que dan idea del origen de ésta," May 1834; (Alamán, 2006); the "Examen imparcial," also written during Alamán's internal exile, appears in the same volume.

The use of this sort of very personal document—as with autobiography, journals, personal correspondence, and even personal experience dressed as fiction, as in many novels—raises the question of the unreliable narrator, whether conscious or unconscious; that is, a narrator (in this case Lucas Alamán) who either shades the truth, misinforms, or outright lies to the reader.²² A writer or memoirist fooling her/himself would fall under this rubric, certainly by effect if not intent. Such a writer might consciously prevaricate or distort for any number of motives: to settle scores, for the purpose of self-vindication, for self-promotion, and so forth. Apart from conscious misrepresentation, unreliable narration would seem inherent in all first-person accounts and would in any case be difficult to distinguish from the point of view to be expected arising from subjectivity. The biographer may even be able to gain some leverage in decoding a personality by analyzing the mistakes or misrepresentations in the subject's writing and comparing them to external, more "reliable" sources. Alamán was certainly no Baron von Münchhausen. He made mistakes in his *memorias*, principally of a genealogical nature, but to the degree I have been able to check his statements, recollections, and impressions in "objective" modern historical writings, they seem truthful and accurate (Brading, 1971; Ladd, 1976). In the end there seems to be no way around this problem except reasonable caution on the part of the life-writer.

There are two issues relating to sources that I want to discuss before moving on to a brief discussion about how much detail in a biography is too much, and then to a conclusion. The first of these concerns a narrative strategy (or if one prefers, an anti-narrative strategy) I employed in my book on Alamán that arose less from an abundance of documentary sources than from their absence. Although it was relatively easy to document his public life in terms of actions, it proved difficult to plumb his internal life, as I have said. An admittedly rather crude model

²² The classic archetype of the "unreliable narrator" was Baron von Münchhausen, as portrayed in Rudolph Erich Raspe's 1785 book *Baron Münchhausen's Narrative of his Marvellous [sic] Travels and Campaigns in Russia*. The historical figure was the Hanoverian aristocrat and soldier Hieronymus Karl Friedrich, Freiherr von Münchhausen (1720-1797), who became famous during his lifetime for his entertaining tall tales of his "experiences" while in the employ of the Russian Imperial army.

of Alamán's worldly presence would progress inward from the level of his actions, mostly observable since he lived so much of his life in the public eye; to his words, both uttered and written; and then to his interior life, the last being the hardest to get at. But he wrote so much, especially in private and business correspondence, and in his historical works, that I felt I might at least try to gauge the quality of his mind, and demonstrate some of his preoccupations, by taking the liberty of quoting his words at greater length than one might ordinarily expect to find in a biography. Had he been more self-revealing in a philosophical or emotional register I might not have felt compelled to do this; but to get at the man—at least at his thinking and at the style of his thought—this seemed to me justified. The fact that he was a leisurely and eloquent writer was of some help here in forestalling the boredom some readers might have experienced; whether this was a good strategy or a bad one I leave to readers to decide.

The second technique I employed I have not seen much, or perhaps at all, in the many biographies I have read, and stands at the exact opposite end of the evidentiary continuum from what I discussed in the preceding paragraph. Life-writing will inevitably pause at plateaus in the subject's life to offer a more intense discussion of this or that aspect. In writing of Lucas Alamán's life I expanded these plateaus into more extensive interventions; this had to do not with the absence or thinness of sources on certain aspects of Alamán's life but their abundance, which allowed me a certain experimental freedom in dealing with several important aspects of his life, chiefly in the economic realm. There are four analytical chapters in the book (aside from the final two, which discuss the writing of his monumental *Historia de Méjico*): on the life of his elder half-brother, the churchman Juan Bautista Arechederreta; Alamán's involvement with British capital in the 1820s in an attempt to revive the silver mining industry; his relations over nearly thirty years with the Duque de Terranova y Monteleone; and his embroilment in the textile enterprise of Cocolapan, near Orizaba, between 1836 and 1843. Although the chapters on the mining episode and the textile enterprise are placed roughly where they occurred during his life, they share with

the much more temporally extended treatments of his brother and his relations with Terranova y Monteleone the characteristic that they were plucked out of the life-stream, as it were, and were not narrated as he lived them, stretched out over a number of years and naturally mixed in with the other events—personal, intellectual, political—of his life. I have therefore referred to them as analytical, since these almost discrete essays were thematically rather than narratively driven and cut across the chronology of his life rather than flowing within it. What has been lost in structuring the book this way, of course, is the way in which the events of these extended episodes collided with other aspects of Alamán's life; but what was gained was a more coherent picture of some key moments and activities. I do not feel I can necessarily recommend this technique to other biographers, but it has lent what I felt an interesting texture to a long book, and beyond that has illuminated important extended moments in his life in a way that would not have been possible had the events in these experiences been diluted according to the way he actually lived them.²³

A Personal Coda: How Much Detail Is Too Much?

My own answer to this question is that it would be unlikely for a biographical work to include too much detail. This is not *exactly* what Mon-

²³ I have purposely steered clear of offering advice to other historian-biographers since those who have already done biographical writing will find such counsels gratuitous, while those who are contemplating it will find their own way. One caution I would offer, however, is that a biographer not undertake to write a novel or any fiction involving the subject of their biography while they are still working on the biography. If one scratches many historians, he will find a novelist just beneath the surface. I confess that many years ago I started writing a novel about the Mexican struggle for independence, never advanced much beyond fifty pages or so and unlikely ever to be completed; but I do revisit it every few years. At one point I decided to incorporate Alamán into the story as a sort of meta-narrator, writing about the insurgency in the late 1840s, near the end of his life. In doing this I relied upon some of the details I was able to unearth about his life, setting the scene specifically at his home on the Ribera de San Cosme, an inventory of which began this essay. Having written several pages about him I became concerned that while my historical research had helped me construct a plausible picture of the fictional man, that picture may have bled back into the biography, so that the history and the fiction became entangled; or, rather, that the fiction had polluted the biography. In the end I think the arrow ran much more strongly from the biography to the aspirational novel than in the opposite direction, but I have always been nervous about it.

taigne was saying in the third epigraph above, but it is close. It has been said that Plutarch included in his biographies of famous statesmen of the ancient world many anecdotes and trivial factoids because he felt them to be more revealing of his great figures' lives and personalities, perhaps, than a simple recounting of their public accomplishments. Lucas Alamán himself struck a similar note in the opening pages of his unfinished and unpublished *memorias* of 1833. Here he suggested with typical density and eloquence several important ideas at the same time: that the tradition of the personal memoir was weak in the Hispanophone world; that such documents could cast much light on the workings of history; that large events may have trivial beginnings; and also that a famous person's life outside the glare of the public spotlight might show more about character than the public persona projected by that individual. He wrote:

Las memorias históricas que forman un ramo tan importante de la literatura francesa [he may have had Montaigne's own writings in mind here], casi no han ocupado hasta ahora a los escritores en nuestra lengua castellana. Ellas sin embargo no solo proporcionan a la historia materiales importantes, sino que a veces exceden a la historia misma para el conocimiento de los sucesos y de los resortes secretos que los han producido. Frecuentemente los mayores acontecimientos dependen de causas pequeñas y aun ridículas que la gravedad de la historia se ofendería de presentar en todos sus pormenores, y *estos pormenores son los que hacen conocer a los hombres*. Un chancista decía que las memorias nos presentan a los héroes en robe de chambre, esto es, tales como son en lo interior de su casa, cuando la historia solo nos los ofrece con armadura o peluca blanca y no es raro hallar que él que entrase de ceremonia parece algo, desnudándose quede reducido a nada.²⁴

There are, of course, reasons why lots of detail in a biography might be too much detail: it may try the reader's patience if deployed in a boring fashion; it may incur the risk of needless repetition and irrelevance; it may run up against the physical requirements of publication. In my own case, I fell afoul of this last hazard. The original manuscript of my book on Alamán was

²⁴ Emphasis added.

650,000 words long. The publisher, Yale University Press, asked that I cut it down to 350,000 words, or almost in half. Publication of the entire original work would have entailed two volumes, each of 600 or so pages. The publication costs and the sale price of such a work would have been prohibitive and the market correspondingly reduced (not that it was likely to be a best-seller, anyway), especially for a scholarly work on a Mexican statesman whom writers outside Mexico, Mexican historians, and the educated Mexican reading public, are unlikely ever to have heard of. I believe the final published version of the book holds up well, but I also believe that the book is considerably impoverished by the cuts I felt it necessary to make, precisely the deletion of revelatory details about his life. One example among many is the fascinating episode in which the twenty-year-old Alamán embroiled himself in a controversy in the capital's *Diario de México* in 1812-1813 with the much older Fermín de Reygadas, a well-known mining engineer, astronomer, and ardent pro-royalist pamphleteer. The young Alamán heaped scorn on Reygadas's attempt to refute Copernican theory in favor of an antiquated geocentric model of the solar system, causing sparks to fly for two or three issues of the journal. I devoted some pages to this episode in my manuscript, but scarcely a dozen lines in the book. The incident demonstrated the young man's burgeoning scientific culture in his command of Copernican theory, his precocity, and his intellectual combativeness—hardly insignificant details, and a foreshadowing of his style when fully mature.

Abundant details about minor aspects of a biographee's life give one a picture of how people notable for their political, cultural, or other accomplishments lived their lives on a daily basis, providing biographers and their readers a 360-degree picture of how they fit into the world and satisfying our natural curiosity about how great (or even humble) people live. Information about how such individuals carried on their domestic lives, for instance, helps to round out the image of their public lives and may suggest interactions and contradictions between what they do in private, when in *robe de chambre*, and when in *armadura ó peluca blanca*. Where the subject's interior life is concerned, it would be a rare case (except perhaps in the

arts) in which public words or actions take on a confessional nature, whereas the details of daily life and other "trivialities" may well be more revealing. Assuming the data are there, of course, the decision about how much detail to include in a biography depends upon the sort of study one hopes to produce.

Conclusion

All this basically boils down to the question of how to interpret a life. What does a life *mean* (again, "meaning" being a relational property) in terms of its significance to larger historical currents, its achievements according to the conventional standards of the subject's times or our own, its connection to other people, and to the figure her/himself? Assuming we seek to be as objective as possible rather than settle a score, as William C. Bullitt is alleged to have done, or advance some other nefarious project, what criteria do we apply to evaluate our effort? The ways in which a life affects and is affected by larger historical currents may not be obvious, but since biographical subjects are often prominent people whose public life is more or less well-documented, as in Lucas Alamán's case, this should be the easiest aspect to deal with. Nor are the achievements of a life necessarily clear immediately: often they are, or with the passage of time become so. Somewhat more difficult to ascertain is the quality of connections to other people. And still more difficult may be the uncovering of secrets the subject of the biography does not wish to reveal. My obligation to the truth of the biography, for example, would have included "outing" Lucas Alamán had I found evidence that he was a closeted gay man, or exposing him for having taken large bribes while in his ministries, or having been an abusive parent. The biographer thus becomes a snoop, and the subject of a biography has in a sense waived her or his right to privacy by being prominent and being dead.

Finally, absent autobiography, memoirs, or a particularly self-revelatory body of personal correspondence, the meaning of a biographical subject's life to himself is the hardest to get at, especially where the personality of the biographee is as opaque as Alamán's. The recognizability to him of the portrait I paint, were he

around to read it, might be one standard, but an impossibly high bar to clear. I can never hope to portray him as he would have portrayed himself had he written a complete and relatively honest autobiography, nor should I.²⁵ It is not that his self-representation would necessarily be “wrong”, but it might be several degrees askew from how other people, including me, saw him. We are often surprised, after all, to find that the impressions we create in other people are quite different from our own. So his complete self-recognizability in what I write of him, or what any biographer writes of any subject, cannot be the measure of success. What, then, do I owe to Lucas Alamán as well as to my readers? What we owe is to try to see them in 360 degrees, the bad with the good; to be sympathetic to them but not indulgent; to look at evidence about their lives with caution but not skepticism; to try to triangulate on major aspects of their characters and activities that might be in dispute rather than take isolated sources at face value; and to try as hard as we can to see through their eyes the times in which they lived. If we fail in this program it is doubtful that those subjects of biography who have passed from this vale of tears will come back to hold us accountable, although book reviewers might; if we succeed even a bit by all these criteria we will in great measure have fulfilled our obligations to them. And in finding the meaning of a life we need to acknowledge that the writing of biography is a peculiarly humanistic undertaking, more intuition than science.

²⁵ There is such a document, in addition to his *memorias* of 1833: *Épocas de los principales sucesos de mi vida*, (Alamán, 2003). This is a very short, very uninflected recounting of events in the author’s life up to 1843, very unrevealing concerning his interior life or even aspects of his career such as politics.

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