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The Trials and Tribulations of Anglophone and Hispanic Biography: A Personal Reflection

Los ensayos y tribulaciones de la biografía anglófona e hispana: una reflexión personal

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Abstract: This article reflects on the evolution and the current state of Anglophone biography, focusing on the inherent and persistent tensions with regard to its definition, value, and purpose, and on its belated acceptance within the Anglophone academy. It also highlights the profound gap between Anglophone biography and the limited scope, practice, and academic marginalisation of Hispanic biography.

Key words: biography; anglophone; hispanic; history; academy.

Resumen: Este artículo reflexiona sobre la evolución y el estado actual de la biografía anglófona, enfocándose en las tensiones inherentes y persistentes con respecto a su definición, valor y propósito, y su aceptación tardía dentro de la academia anglófona. También destaca la gran brecha entre la biografía anglófona y el alcance limitado, la práctica y la marginación académica de la biografía hispana.

Palabras clave: biografía; anglófono; hispano; historia; academia.

> "There are three rules for writing a biography, but, fortunately, no one knows what they are." (Somerset Maugham)

My initial idea for this article envisaged an overview and comparison of the different biographical traditions in the Anglophone and Hispanic worlds. This, I have realised, was not only an ambitious but a false prospectus. So much of what has been written about biography comes from sources written in English, and is overwhelmingly concerned with Anglophone biographies. By contrast, there appears to be very little analysis or scholarship on the character and status of Hispanic biography on which to draw for comparative purposes. As a result, I propose instead to reflect on the evolution and the current state of Anglophone biography, focusing on the inherent and persistent tensions with regard to its definition, value, and purpose, and on its belated acceptance within the Anglophone academy. The contrast with the limited scope, practice, and academic marginalisation of Hispanic biography is profound. As a former student of literature, and as a professional historian, I should also confess to my personal belief in the value of biographical studies which attempt the difficult task of portraying, as Virginia Woolf so elegantly put it, both "the rainbow of personality and the granite of recorded fact". But, as we shall see, many writers and academics, including Woolf herself, have doubted whether such a task is either legitimate or possible.

BIOGRAPHY AND ITS CRITICS

As even a cursory glance at the growing literature on the subject will demonstrate, biography has attracted more criticism than praise. According the nineteenth-century Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle, one of the leading exponents of the biographical tradition, the fundamental task of the biographer is "to create intimate links between the dead and the living... To write a life should be an act of sympathy, for which the biographer needs an open and loving heart." In a similar vein, Richard Holmes, the first occupant of the first Chair of Biographical Studies in the UK at the University of East Anglia (appointed, significantly, only in 2001), has argued that scholarship

is not enough for a successful biography, and that the biographer needs to "combine scholarship with storytelling".[1] While academics in general have a good deal of sympathy for scholarship, they have an innate suspicion of storytelling as a legitimate academic activity. This perhaps explains the general ambivalence within the academy for the "dark arts" of biography, alongside the absence of a clearly-defined disciplinary home or status, and its essential subjectivity or perceived frivolity. Is Biography History, Literature, Sociology, Psychology or Psychoanalysis, or simply Journalism, or –perhaps especially distasteful to the high-minded academic– mere Gossip?

Whilst it is clear that there are two branches of the academy –historians and specialists in literary studies– which are most supportive of biography, there is, nonetheless, plenty of dissent within their ranks. Most notably, a number of trends within literary criticism over the course of the C20 have also been highly critical of the genre. For example, for the proponents of aestheticism, including the modernist writers at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, artistic expression in whatever form should be seen as inviolable, and should not be subjected to (or contaminated, or violated by) the examination of the artist's biography. The formalists of the 1920s argued that everything necessary to comprehending a work of art is contained within the work itself. The context for the work, the reason for its creation, the historical background, and the life of the artist –were all considered to be irrelevant. Subsequently, in the 1960s Roland Barthes and the post-structuralists dealt what they considered to be the *coup de grace* to the biography and proclaimed "Death of the Author", arguing that readers must thus separate a literary work from its creator in order to liberate the text from "interpretative tyranny". Once completed, works of art or fiction no longer belonged to their author, but to the reader, and to the public.

As a parallel phenomenon, writers of fiction themselves have been particularly critical of biography, describing it as, at best, an inferior product, and, at worst, an undignified and even contemptuous activity. In his poem "Posterity", English poet Philip Larkin used the fictional American academic Jake Balokowsky to satirise the cynicism and contempt of literary biographers for their subjects, using them as pawns in pursuit of promotion

[1] Both quotes from R. Holmes (2002, pp. 7-18).

in their academic careers.[2] British novelist Julian Barnes has also described what he sees as the limitations of the genre:

> You can define a net in one of two ways, depending on your point of view. Normally, you would say that it is a meshed instrument designed to catch fish. But you could reverse the image and define a net...(as) a collection of holes tied together with string. You can do the same with a biography. The trawling net fills, then the biographer hauls it in, sorts, throws back, stores, fillets and sells. Yet consider what he doesn't catch: there is always far more of that (Lee, 2009).

Michael Holroyd (2003, pp. 3-9), one of the most respected biographers of his generation, has listed the sometimes splenetic denunciations of biography provided by more than one generation of distinguished practitioners of literary fiction. There appears to be no shortage of negative comment. For the 18th century essayist, poet, playwright, and politician Joseph Addison, biographers "watch for the death of a great man, like so many undertakers, on purpose to make a penny of him", adding that it was impossible to describe this type of writer "without indignation as well as contempt". In the

[2] P. Larkin (1974) "Posterity":
Jake Balokowsky, my biographer,
Has this page microfilmed. Sitting inside
His air-conditioned cell at Kennedy
In jeans and sneakers, he's no call to hide
Some slight impatience with his destiny:
'I'm stuck with this old fart at least a year;

I wanted to teach school in Tel Aviv,
But Myra's folks' - he makes the money sign -
"Insisted I got tenure. When there's kids -"
He shrugs. "It's stinking dead, the research line;
Just let me put this bastard on the skids,
I'll get a couple of semesters leave

To work on Protest Theater." They both rise,
Make for the Coke dispenser. "What's he like?
Christ, I just told you. Oh, you know the thing,
That crummy textbook stuff from Freshman Psych,
Not out of kicks or something happening -
One of those old-type *natural* fouled-up guys."

nineteenth century, George Eliot (the pen name of novelist Mary Anne Evans) declared that "biographers are generally a disease of English literature". Oscar Wilde famously wrote that "every great man has his disciples, and it is always Judas who writes the biography." In the twentieth century, James Joyce volunteered the opinion that those who practiced biography should not be called biographers, but "biografiends". Echoing James Addison, writer and literary critic Rebecca West famously described biographers as picnickers at the graves of the dead, sucking the bones clean and flinging them over their shoulders. The description of the biographer as vulture or scavenger has also been used by contemporary writers such as Australian cultural critic Germaine Greer who has described biographies as no more than "pre-digested carrion".

Holroyd is undoubtedly correct in identifying this profound animosity to biography by so many writers as the reason why they have frequently sought to prevent potential biographers from getting their grubby hands on vital sources. "Is it any wonder, then", he writes, "that so many writers took the trouble to destroy their papers; or that many more, realising that they could not destroy the letters they had sent other people, drafted warnings to their executors against biographers? T. S. Eliot, Somerset Maugham, George Orwell, Jean Rhys, Philip Larkin, all did this" (Holroyd, 2003, p. 7).

Even more surprisingly, biographers themselves have questioned biography's legitimacy. Janet Malcolm, herself a practitioner as the biographer of poets Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, has written that "the biographer at work is like a professional burglar, breaking into a house, rifling through certain drawers that he has good reason to think contain jewelry and money, and triumphantly bearing the loot away" (Lee, 2009). Robert Skidelsky, biographer of John Maynard Keynes has also commented that "Biography is voyeurism embellished with footnotes", a further example of the biographers' ambivalence towards their craft.

BIOGRAPHY IN THE ANGLOPHONE AND HISPANIC ACADEMY

It is clear that the hostility towards biography has been persistent throughout the evolution of the genre. As already indicated above, such hostility has dented and delayed its acceptance within the academy. The French critic

Francois Dosse (2007) states bluntly that "biography has been scorned in the erudite world of the university" (p. 18). According to Peter France (2002), editor of *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, "biography is a suspect enterprise", suspect not only on aesthetic or ideological grounds, but because of its ambivalent or indeterminate disciplinary status.

However, over the last two decades, there have been clear signs that the hostility within the academy has begun to thaw, especially in universities in the Anglophone world. This is, I would argue, primarily a response to the "cultural turn" and concomitant rise of the cult of interdisciplinarity in university Humanities Departments over the last three decades. Centres or Institutes of Biographical Research have been established predominantly in English or Literature/Modern Language Departments. Hermoine Lee (2005), biographer of Virginia Woolf, former Goldsmiths Professor of English Literature at Oxford between 1998-2008, and subsequently the President of Wolfson College, Oxford, claims that the academy has now accepted Biographical Studies as a legitimate field of academic study. She points to the fact that the University of Hawaii has had a "Centre for Biographical Research" since the late 1970s,[3] and that the City University in New York has long had a "Center for Biography". In Australia there is a "Biography Institute" in the University of Canberra. In the UK, in 2002, the British Academy chose the topic of "Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography" for an academic conference commemorating its first centenary. As already mentioned, in 2001 the first Chair of Biographical Studies in the UK was established in the University of East Anglia.

However, the contrast with the Universities in the Hispanic World is stark. As far as I am aware, there is only one formally-constituted academic centre, the *Unidad de Estudios Biográficos* in the Universidad de Barcelona, established in 1994. It is also important to mention the *Centro Digital de Estudios Biográficos*, and on-line resource sponsored by the *Real Academia de la Historia* in Madrid, which was initiated in 2008. For Latin America there is also a digital network, *La Red de Estudios Biográficos de América Latina* also established in 2008, but this appears to be little more than a list of a small number of individuals in specific countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Uru-

[3] The Centre for Biographical Research at the University of Hawaii has since 1977 published the pioneering academic journal devoted to Biographical and Autobiographical Studies, *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*.

guay). These innovations are not insignificant, but they are very recent, and, so far at least, appear to be of limited scope. It is apparent from this limited evidence that biography in the Hispanic academy enjoys a very different and more limited status by comparison with its Anglophone counterpart.

ANGLOPHONE AND HISPANIC BIOGRAPHICAL TRADITIONS: AN OVERVIEW

The Anglophone biographical tradition can be traced back to the end of the 16th century with evidence of early attempts to break away from the hagiographical biographies of classical antiquity in the search for authenticity and intimacy and the portrayal of the subject's inner life. One of the catalysts seems to have been a revival of interest in Plutarch's *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, written in the 1st century AD. According to Shakespeare biographer James Shapiro, the 1575 translation of Plutarch's *Lives* was particularly influential in the composition of both *Henry the Fifth* and *Julius Caesar* (Shapiro, 2006). Plutarch's original text had made a distinction between the portrayal of the subject's inner life (biography) and outer life (history):

> My design is not to write Histories, but Lives. The most glorious exploits do not always furnish us with the clearest discoveries of virtue or vice in men: sometimes a matter of less moment, an expression, or jest, informs us better of the characters and inclinations, than the most famous sieges, the greatest armaments, or the bloodiest battles [...] Therefore, as portrait painters are more exact in the lines and features of the face, in which character is seen than in the other parts of the body, so I must be allowed to give my more particular attention to the marks and indications of the souls of men, and while I endeavour by these to portray their lives, (I) may be free to leave more weighty matters and great battles to be treated by others (Lee, 2009).

The pursuit of the inner life of the biographical subject continued to meet stiff resistance from the authors of life histories throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries which preferred, in general, to focus on the exemplary actions and writings of prominent public men. There is a consensus amongst historians of the Anglophone biographical tradition that

the definitive breakthroughs towards a more rounded, empathetic and intimate portrayal of the subject's inner life came with the publication of Samuel Johnson's *An Account of the Life of Mr Richard Savage, Son of the Earl Rivers* in 1744, and of James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* in 1791 (Gillies, 2009).

As Johnson himself famously wrote in 1750: "no species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography, since none can be more delightful or more useful, none can more certainly enchain the heart by irresistible interest, or more widely diffuse instruction to every diversity of condition" (France & St. Clair, 2002, p. 3). And as Richard Holmes explains, these works allowed the biographer to: "take obscure, failed, and damaged lives, and make them intensely moving and revealing. Biography was an act of imaginative friendship, and depended on moral intelligence and human sympathy. Biography had become a new kind of narrative about the mysteries of the human heart" (Holmes, 2010).

The status of biography received a further boost during the 19th century in an age of nation-building, imperialism, and national historicism, but, at the same time, there was also a revival of biography as an examination and celebration of "Great Lives" (or, rather, "Great Male Lives", since women were very notably under-represented). Biography became an important tool in the construction of national identity, and was consolidated in the compilation of national biographical dictionaries. In Britain, for example, this trend had its origins in the publication of the seven volumes of *Biographia Britannica* between 1747 and 1766, which had clearly stated that its purpose was to advance "the reputation of our country" and "the honour of ancestors". It was conceived of as "a British Temple of Honour, sacred to the piety, learning, valour, public spirit, loyalty and every other glorious virtue of our ancestors" (Thomas, 2005, p. 15). The stimulus to nationalist-oriented biography strengthened during the course of the nineteenth century and culminated in the publication of the first volume of the *Dictionary of National Biography* in 1882. By 1900 the *Dictionary* had been extended to a total of 29 000 entries by over 600 authors in 63 volumes. As a measure of its influence over the Anglophone biographical tradition, following successive reprints and supplementary volumes throughout the 20th century, the series was revised and re-issued in 60 volumes as the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* in 2004 (Goldman, 2006, pp. 111-132).

It is also important to point out that the trend towards national (and nationalist) biography in the 19th century was not exclusively an Anglophone

phenomenon (Matthew, 1995, p. 36). There were many large-scale national biographical projects in this period, with compilations of Swedish, Dutch, Austrian, Belgian, German, Danish, French, and North American biography (the latter in the form of *Appleton's Cyclopedia of American Biography*). However, Spain and the republics of Spanish America are notable absences from this list.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of the different status of biography in the Anglo and Hispanic Worlds is the number of biographies which are published and sold. To my knowledge there are no formal statistics on biographies published in Latin America, but my impression is that the number is low. By contrast, in the UK (according to Richard Holmes) is over 3 000 per year; in France, according to Francois Dosse, it is around 1 000.

Here it is appropriate to speculate on some of the reasons for the relative paucity of serious biographies and academic centres of Biographical Studies in the Hispanic World. Enrique Krauze, the Mexican historian who has been the most prominent advocate of biography in the Hispanic world (and the author and sponsor of a number of popular biographies published by his Clío publishing house in Mexico) has argued that, throughout the Hispanic world in general, a truly "liberal spirit" of open-mindedness and tolerance has always been weak, overwhelmed by a culture which has always been "*cerrada, cortesana, jerárquica y poco liberal*" ("closed, deferential, hierarchical, and illiberal").

In spite of Krauze's cultural pessimism, it is important to point out that biography has also played a significant role in Hispanic nation-building, much like its Anglophone counterpart, but that Hispanic biography has continued to be tainted by and tethered to a politicised nationalism through the sanctification of its national heroes and the denigration of its national villains.[4] From my experience in Mexico, I would add that the politicisation of historical enquiry and the overwhelming cultural capital and cultural power of state-sanctioned *historia patria* with its pantheon of heroes and villains has had such a powerful influence over historical enquiry that hagiographies (or *historias de bronce*) have dominated the genre.

As an example, in the course of my research for a political biography of President Porfirio Díaz (1876-1880, 1884-1911), it became clear that the cen-

[4] These themes are explored in Brunk & Fallaw (2006); see also Valenzuela (2014, pp. 745-761).

tral obstacles to a more impartial interpretation were the ways in which the image of Díaz had been fashioned, denigrated, and, above all, appropriated over the course of the last century. Portrayed as a national hero during the lifetime of the regime, contemporary biographies of Díaz before 1910 praised the personal qualities which justified his monopolisation of political office for over thirty years: his patriotism, heroism, dedication, self-sacrifice, tenacity, and courage. Following the implosion of the regime in 1911 and the subsequent struggle for power during the course of the Mexican Revolution, Díaz was condemned for his corruption, his dishonesty, and his betrayal of national interests, and his regime was depicted as the supreme example of tyranny, dictatorship and oppression. These conflicting interpretations clearly made it very difficult to construct a balanced interpretation of either the man and or his regime (Garner, 2015).

The persistence of the discursive power of the pantheon of national heroes and villains has meant that more subtle and nuanced (i. e. professional or balanced) forms of biographical study have been discouraged within the Hispanic academy, have failed to spark major popular interest, and have therefore not been taken up by major publishing houses, either academic or commercial. It is also the case that interdisciplinary studies in universities in the Hispanic world have lagged behind those in the Anglophone or Francophone world.

There is also a very practical reason for the absence of serious biography in the Hispanic world. The personal papers of prominent individuals –the bread and butter (and, above all, the jam) of the serious biographer– have all too often been destroyed, or retained in the hands of their families and descendants, who have often been reluctant to release them to unknown and independent researchers –because of what the papers might reveal– or to bequeath them to public archives or libraries because they are suspicious of the ability of the state to look after and preserve the material. As a result, it is worth repeating, the majority of biographies and autobiographies published tend to be either hagiographies or character assassinations, or the memoirs of prominent individuals (usually politicians) seeking for a vehicle to cover up (rather than to expose or explain) their past deeds. There have recently been encouraging signs of changing attitudes, but progress has been slow.

BIOGRAPHY IN THE MODERN ERA

As we have seen, the Victorian and Edwardian era witnessed a significant period of promotion, popularity, and consumption of the "Lives and Letters" model in Anglophone biography. The classic biography of this period was a vehicle for demonstrating the virtues of an exemplary life, and how to avoid the pitfalls and the temptations of vice. Its purpose was didactic, helping the reader, as Elinor Shaffer (2002, pp. 115-133) explains, "in understanding human character... in order to improve their education, and moral conduct". The emphasis was on the depiction of "great lives" of national heroes, exemplified, as mentioned above, by Thomas Carlyle's classic *Of Heroes and Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841).

However, the crisis which befell the comfortable Victorian and Edwardian world of moral virtue, rectitude, sentimentality, and hero worship following the First World War (1914-18) precipitated another swing in the biographical pendulum towards a more critical and challenging examination of the subject's inner life. This trend was given additional stimulus by the growing influence of Freudian psychoanalysis. As Freud himself explained, biography is always a difficult and dangerous minefield for the unwary biographer:

> Biographers are fixated on their heroes in a quite special way. In many cases they have chosen their hero as the subject of their studies because –for reasons of their personal emotional life– they have felt a special affection for him from the very first. They then devote their energies to a task of idealization, aimed at enrolling the great man among the class of their infantile models –at reviving in him, perhaps, the child's idea of his father. To gratify this wish they obliterate the individual features of their subject's physiognomy: they smooth over the traces of his life's struggles with internal and external resistances, and they tolerate in him no vestige of human weakness or imperfection. Thus they present us with what is in fact a cold, strange, ideal figure, instead of a human being to whom we might feel ourselves distantly related. That they should do this is regrettable, for they thereby sacrifice truth to an illusion, and, for the sake of their infantile fantasies, abandon the opportunity of penetrating the most fascinating secrets of human nature.[5]

[5] Bowie (2002, pp. 177-192). Freud's comments echo the famous statement of Thomas Macaulay, one of the Victorian era's most ardent promoters of biography: "Biographers,

The combination of these significant developments following the carnage of the "Great" War –Freudian psychoanalysis, imperial angst, and a high degree of moral disillusionment and social unrest– gave a significant stimulus to the development of the cultures of iconoclasm and experimentation which gave rise to modernism, exemplified in Britain by the collective literary and artistic output of the Bloomsbury Group. The profound effect on biography could be seen in the publication and reception of founder member Lynton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* in 1918, considered by Strachey's biographer, Michael Holroyd (2003), to have "liberated" the biographical genre from its shackles:

> Strachey's preface to *Eminent Victorians* has acted as a powerful manifesto for twentieth-century biographers. "Human beings are too important to be treated as mere symptoms of the past" he wrote. "They have a value which is independent of any temporal process –which is eternal, and must be felt for its own sake." Since then, the boundaries (of biography) have been enlarged, until its subject matter is pretty well now the whole range of human experience, insofar as it can be recovered [...] We do not imitate Strachey, but it was he who liberated the form for all of us. (p. 26)

HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY

As already alluded to above, it is important to highlight both the links, as well as the tensions, between biography and history, one of the two disciplines with which biography is most closely associated, and most frequently practiced. These tensions have been constantly present since the origins of biography. Following on from Plutarch's distinction between the understanding and depiction of both the inner and the outer life of the biographical subject, the most common metaphors adopted used to illustrate the differences (and the tensions) are those of history as "autopsy" (i. e. scientific, dispassionate, cold, objective, forensic); and biography as "portrait" (i. e. subjective, emotional, internalised, and, since the end of the nineteenth century, psycho-

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translators, editors, all, in short, who employ themselves in illustrating the lives or writings of others, are particularly exposed to the '*Lues Boswelliana*' or the disease of admiration" (1834).

analytical or "Freudian"). As Hermione Lee notes, citing another founder member of the Bloomsbury Group, Virginia Woolf, historical biography has an obvious and necessary obligation to study the life of not only the fish, but the stream in which it swims. As mentioned in the introduction, Woolf also highlighted the necessity for "true" biography to portray both "the rainbow of personality and the granite of recorded fact", although she also clearly appeared to favour fiction over biography, declaring that "the truth of fact and the truth of fiction are incompatible", and that "the self can truthfully be defined only in fiction" (Monk, 2007, pp. 1-40).

Woolf's contribution to the analysis of biography has been highly influential, but has not gone unchallenged. Other biographers have argued that the exclusive or primary concentration on a subjective portrait of the biographical subject's inner life is fraught with dangers, and that historical and social context is crucial to successful biography. In his criticism of previous biographies of the early nineteenth-century novelist Jane Austen, biographer Park Honan (1985), former Professor of Literature at the University of Leeds, argued that dependence on the subject's personal correspondence paints a distorted and inadequate portrait:

> Following its lead, biographers cast Jane Austen as heroine in a tedious, pointless Regency soap opera. They cannot match her light style and wit. But they follow her letters' content and take us from one ball, visit, or family gathering to the next. They fail to examine forces that may have encouraged her talent; they tell us little about England's social-class structure, Hampshire's economy, political affiliations of the gentry, or the war that is reflected in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*; nothing about the French Revolution and its ideas; nothing about English anti-Jacobinism of the 1790s; nothing about socioeconomic changes after Trafalgar. They send her upstairs with a tear and a laugh to write novels; in her bedroom, but sometimes in the parlor, she is visited by an awesome spook called Genius.

This quote points to further tensions in the construction of a serious biography, which concern the choice of source material, and the appropriate degree of selection, censorship, organization, rationalization and narration on the part of the biographer of the raw material of human life, which, as we all know, tends to be anything but orderly, coherent, or rational. As W.B.

Yeats put it, how is the biographer to make sense of "the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast every morning"? (Lee, 2009).

Hermione Lee (2005) has outlined the depths to which the modern biographer must delve in order to obtain "a feeling for detail, the evocation of personality, and a commitment to telling the truth... (but also)... s/he must create a vivid sense of a living person, with all their peculiarities intimacies, revelations and inwardness –the body odour, dental structure, sexual preferences". Some biographers take this quest even further. Richard Holmes (1985) is famous for (literally) following in the footsteps of his subjects Robert Louis Stevenson in rural France, Mary Woolstonecraft in Paris, and the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley in Italy, attempting to emulate, understand, and share at first hand their emotional, sensual and visual experiences in order to find clues to the sources of literary creation. Claude Arnaud, biographer of the French novelist and film-maker Jean Cocteau, explains that the biographer must be not only an anthropologist, but an "antropófago" (cannibal). "I eat my subject's tongue, heart and brain" (cited en Dosse, 2007, p. 28). This may, however, be taking the biographical quest a little too far.

I will end with one my favourite quotes on the subject of biography, which indicate the inherent difficulties and complexities in the construction of a serious biography. Gordon Bowker (1993) wrote in the introduction to his biography of British novelist Malcolm Lowry, author of *Under the Volcano* (1947): "Trying to follow Lowry's life is like venturing without a map into a maze inside a labyrinth lost in a wilderness. The maze itself is a shadow-filled hall of distorting mirrors, some of them cracked. In what little light there is we catch sight of a figure in various disguises, luring us on like a will-o-the-wisp, first down one trail, and then along another."

Finally, we should return to the provocative statement by novelist, critic, and cynic, Somerset Maugham which prefaced this article. It is not only mischievous, and a good example of British sense of humour and its penchant for irony, but it also highlights the fact that the recent proliferation of analysis and scholarship on the subject of biography means that the statement is both inaccurate and redundant. We now know more than enough about the pitfalls and perils, as well as the joys and insights which biography can offer, and without in any way attempting to patronise, our colleagues in the Hispanic Academy need to be encouraged to undertake the challenge.

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