

Eater-Reception and De-Composition: Worms in *Yo el Supremo*



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Let's talk of graves, of worms, and epitaphs:
Make dust our paper, and with rainy eyes
Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth.

Richard II

A footnote to *Yo el Supremo* ends with the observation that the Supreme Dictator used a riddle "en su invectiva sobre los historiadores, los escritores y la polilla: 'Un insecto comió palabras. Creyó devorar el famoso canto del hombre y su fuerte fundamento. Nada aprendió el huésped ladrón con haber devorado palabras'" (144n.).¹ This riddle, extracted from Borges's translation of a famous Anglo-Saxon riddle on the bookworm, cuts to the quick of the novel—the Supreme Dictator's obsession with memory—and highlights its procedure—fragmented intertextual reference. In this paper I shall explore the implications of these few lines in the context of Roa's whole text.

The Anglo-Saxon riddle reads:

Modde word fract. Me þæt þuhte
wraetlicu wyrd. þa ic þæt wundor gefraegn,
þæt se wyrm forswealg wera gied sumes,
þeof in þystro. þrymfaestne cwide
ond þæs strangan stapol. Staelgiest ne waes
wihite þy gleawra, þe he þam wordum swealg.²

The riddle is a reflection on the fragility of written literature, subject as can be seen to the degradations of ignorant insects, and is implicitly a celebration of the relative permanence of oral literature, which does not depend on material means. The song of men—*cwide*, the word, is used consistently in the corpus of Anglo-Saxon poetry to designate oral song or utterance³—is only subject to moth and worm when written down, in what must have seemed to the Anglo-Saxon bard as an exercise in futility.⁴

Borges translates the riddle in his *Literaturas germánicas medievales*, after

commenting that in the Middle Ages "la adivinanza era un género literario y todos percibían su afinidad con la metáfora y la alegoría. Las noventa y cinco piezas del Códice de Exeter carecen de rigor; son menos ingeniosas que poéticas."⁵ Borges calls the riddle of the bookworm "una curiosa adivinanza . . . de la polilla," and translates:

Un gusano comió palabras. Me pareció escuchar una maravilla: el gusano, un ladrón en la oscuridad, había devorado el famoso canto de un hombre y su fuerte fundamento. Nada aprendió el furtivo huésped con haber devorado palabras.⁶

Roa in his version trims the riddle slightly without significantly changing it; there can be no doubt because of the nearly identical wording that his source is the Borges translation and not the Anglo-Saxon text itself.

Even though the translation of the riddle offered us by Borges and Roa is an accurate one which captures the sense of the original text, a Menardian inversion has taken place. Where the original riddle stresses the vulnerability of the song when it is written down, the contemporary versions focus on the devouring worm, that reader who learns nothing from the text he incorporates. Although reader-reception theory insists on the idea that the reader must make something of the text, must realize it within himself, this is clearly not the kind of realization that anyone is talking about. The worm is that practical critic we know from the work of I. A. Richards who would make of the text what he will, in fact turning it into something completely different from what its presumed author intended: food, in this case, not for thought but for mere sustenance.

The worm is a latecomer to the text and is not interested in its elaboration. The worm's activity is a purely deconstructive reading, focused on the song not in its orality but in its materiality (its "strangan stapol" or "fuerte fundamento"). Like *El Supremo's* "portaplumas-recuerdo," which erases as it writes, the bookworm suggests a poetics of absence rather than of presence.

Yo el Supremo suggests many other inversions of the usual procedure of the prior elaboration and subsequent reception of the text. The Supremo's amanuensis, Patiño, finds himself unable to write down what Francia is dictating to him and to understand it at the same time. The dictator himself asserts on several occasions that his book was "read first and written afterwards," an assertion which seeks to explain the collage of texts included in it. And the Supremo's expectation that the text will admit of no commentary that is not already included in it deprives the reader of the usual freedom to interpret, just as the dictator's discourse is one which closes off the possibility of dialogue.

However, to the extent that we are what we eat, it can be argued that the worm becomes the text it devours. The mystery of incarnation—suggested in this image—takes many forms in the whole text of Roa's novel. From the imaginary people counted in the Supremo's census, who late in the novel invade Asunción, disquieting the soldiers who discover that like

Adam they are people without navels, to the water in the tub in which Patiño the amanuensis submerges his feet during his many years of taking dictation, water which finally acquires the form of his feet, *Yo el Supremo* is concerned in important ways with the way things take shape (and with the ways words shape things). Worms, which take things apart, have an important place in Roa's bestiary, along with the Supremo's other (carnivorous) animals, the rats in his prisons, his ravens⁷ and his pet buzzards, Tiberio and Caligula.

Bookworms are mentioned numerous times in the course of the book. The Supremo compares the sound of the clocks with the "ruidito de las polillas en los libros" (183). The historians who are true to the letter but falsify the spirit of an event gnaw away at the truth of documents as surely as do bookworms and rats (211). And, in what is one of the more significant images of reading in the novel, when the Supremo tells us that as a boy "cuando leía un libro, me metía dentro de él, de modo que cuando lo cerraba seguía leyéndolo (como la cucaracha y la polilla, ¡eh!)" (446). The human activities of being concerned with truth and with time, and of becoming involved in fictions, are seen reflected in the worm's, or perhaps each reflects the other.

The Supremo recalls Franklin's mock-epitaph:

Aquí yace pasto de los gusanos
el cuerpo de Benjamin Franklin
como el forro de un libro viejo,
descosido, ajado. Mas la obra no
se perderá pues ha de reaparecer,
como él lo espera, en una nueva
edición revisada, corregida por
el Autor.

(246)

The English original of Franklin's mock-epitaph of 1728 reads:

The Body of
B. Franklin Printer,
(Like the Cover of an Old Book
Its Contents torn out
And stript of its Lettering & Gilding)
Lies here, Food for Worms.
But the Work shall not be lost:
For it will, (as he believ'd) appear once more,
In a new and more elegant Edition
Revised and corrected,
By the Author.⁸

We again note that Roa alters when he quotes, the most significant changes here being the greater importance given to the worms in Roa's version (in which they move from the sixth line to the first), and the omission of

Franklin's description of himself as Printer, a term he also used prominently some sixty years later in his will.⁹

Some pages after the translation of Franklin's mock-epitaph, the Dictator recalls it with a remark that his enemies Simón Bolívar and Dean Gregorio Funes have died: "Entregaron a los gusanos, lectores neutros y neutrales de probos y de réprobos, el libro viejo y descosido de su malvada persona" (288). Though Franklin, a printer by trade, who often uses printers' images, already presented the idea of a person as an edition of a (perfectible) work, only in the Supremo's revision does the emphasis pass to the worm as reader of the corpse-text, a process similar to what we have already seen in the revision of the bookworm riddle. The worm is a neutral reader since it takes no part in the text (but rather incorporates it), and is perhaps neuter in contrast to Cortázar's sexist categories. Neither "lector-cómplice" who completes the text nor "lector-hembra" who passively accepts it, the worm is in every sense an indifferent reader.¹⁰

The first mention of worms in the book suggests that men are reincarnated as worms:

Cuando pienso en esta fauna perversa [los "escribones"] imagino un mundo donde los hombres nacen viejos. Decrecen, se van arrugando, hasta que los encierran en una botella. Adentro se van volviendo más pequeños aún, de modo que se podría comer diez Alejandro y veinte Césares untados a una rebanada de pan o a un trozo de mandioca. Mi ventaja es que ya no necesito comer y no me importa que me coman estos gusanos.

(76)

The proposal that men evolve into worms is simultaneous with the text's revelation that the narrator is dead, a mere tissue of worms. The Supremo is perhaps the ultimate example in literature of Kipling's maxim "Eat or Be Eaten." Some of the most gruesome moments in the novel are those when the Supremo notices the flies emerging from his body (344), or later when he recites—for two whole pages—the names of a whole insect kingdom that inhabits him, among them "las nueve especies de necróforos, homeros liróforos de esta epopeya funeraria" (453). These final readers of the text of his person are, as his metaphor suggests here (and as he has prescribed elsewhere) at one with their subject, penetrating, we might say, to its very essence. Decomposition is a fundamental leitmotif of Roa's novel, marking a text which is compiled but never composed.

The footnote in which the Anglo-Saxon riddle appears discusses the sex of the sun and moon in Guarani mythology (as quoted by Borges from Lugones's book on the Jesuit empire in Paraguay).¹¹ The footnote purports to clarify the following passage in Roa's novel:

Desde los libros antiguos, incluido el Génesis, sabemos que el hombre primitivo ha sido en el origen varón/hembra. Ninguna progenie es enteramente pura. Cada cien años y un día, mejor dicho, cada largo día de cien años, lo varón y lo hembra se encarnan en un solo ser que hace surgir los seres, los hechos, las cosas.

(143)

The mystery of incarnation again: everything arises from the androgyne, from the union of what Hamlet calls "Lady Worm"¹² with the great Corpus.

The importance of the activity of worms, whether bookworms or corpse-worms, in *Yo el Supremo* is highlighted by the many notes by the editor in places where the manuscript has been burnt or chewed to illegibility. This deconstruction has a festive side: one of the notes explains that here "las polillas han pastado a gusto dejando grandes agujeros" (308). A reader cannot but notice that the worms have exquisite literary or political taste: they have left holes at precisely those points when the Supremo seems about to reveal himself, as notably at the end of the work, in which the end of the phrase "Devoran mi imagen, mas ya no distingo la suya envuelta en la negra capa de forro carmesí" (453) is petrified, and the final sentence is "empastado, ilegible el resto, inhallable los restos, desparramadas las carcomidas letras del Libro" (456). The worms become the Supremo and, as he would have wished, do not distinguish between his (multiple) person and his representation of himself in his text.

Echoing Plato's Cratylus, the Dictator asks himself: "¿Podrías inventar un lenguaje en el que el signo sea idéntico al objeto?" (66). In the worms he finds his answer. Ideal readers for whom the sign is the signified, for whom language is absolutely transparent, for the worms the Book of Life is as good (to eat) as the Book of Books. If they were forbidden to study the one, as was Sor Juana,¹³ they would surely find equal satisfaction in studying the other.

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NOTES

- 1 Parenthetical references in the text are to the seventh edition of *Yo el Supremo*, published in Mexico City by Siglo XXI in 1977.
- 2 George Philip Krapp and Eliott Van Kirk Dobbie, eds., *The Exeter Book*, in *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, vol. 3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), p. 25.
- 3 See Bosworth and Toller, *The Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1882), p. 180, and J. B. Bessinger, Jr., ed., *A Concordance to the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 182.
- 4 I am indebted to my colleague Les Perelman for this reading of the Anglo-Saxon riddle.
- 5 Borges and María Esther Vázquez, *Literaturas germánicas medievales* (Buenos Aires: Falbo Librero Editor, 1965), pp. 54-55.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.
- 7 Besides the pet ravens, a famous literary raven (Poe's) makes an appearance on page 451, when the Supreme Dictator says of the swallows blinded by hail: "¡Esos pájaros soy YO! ¡Atención! ¡Me esperan! Si no voy con la maleta de la Justicia no los reconoceré nunca . . .

nunca . . .
 nunca . . .
 nunca . . .
 nunca . . .
 NUNCA MAS!!!"

The intertextual reference here is quite complex: the repetition of *nunca* recalls not only Poe's "Nevermore" but also King Lear's last speech with its quintuple repetition of *never* (*Lear* V.iii).

- 8 Quoted from Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Co., 1941), p. 124.
- 9 See Van Doren, p. 123.
- 10 In Machado de Assis's *Dom Casimiro*, the narrator at one point tries to interrogate a bookworm on the content of the book where he finds it eating. The worm replies: "Meu senhor, . . . nós não sabemos absolutamente nada dos textos que roemos, nem escolhemos o que roemos, nem amamos ou detestamos o que roemos; nós roemos." *Obras Completas* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Nova Aguilar, 1979), 1:827.
- 11 See Borges's essay on the Icelandic kenningar, in *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974), 375. Borges is quoting from *El imperio jesuitico*, where Lugones writes of the indigenous inhabitants of Paraguay: "El entierro de los muertos, con la cabeza sobresaliendo del suelo y cubierta por un tazón de barro, es otra peculiaridad igualmente difundida; sucediendo lo mismo con la original circunstancia cosmogónica, de considerar macho a la luna y hembra al sol." *El imperio jesuitico* (Buenos Aires: Compañía Sud-Americana de Billetes de Banco, 1904), 123-124. We note that the original source of the reference to the gender of the sun and moon links this cosmological "peculiarly," in Lugones's term, with the Guarani burial customs.
- 12 *Hamlet* V.i. In light of Freudian ideas about the symbolism of the worm, Hamlet's Lady Worm is surely another incarnation of the androgyne of the Guarani myths.
- 13 *Obras completas* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultural Económica, 1957), 4:458.