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SYMPOSIUM

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DANIEL BALDERSTON

THE MAKING OF A PRECURSOR: CARLYLE IN *YO EL SUPREMO*

Sentí por primera vez que la escritura era para mí los bordes de una cicatriz que guardaba intacta su herida secreta e indecible.

Roa Bastos, "Algunos núcleos generadores" (74)

So much is unspeakable, O Rodriguez, and it is a most strange universe this thou hast been born into. . . . Much is unspeakable, answers Francia, but somewhat also is speakable.

Carlyle, "Dr. Francia" (226)

AMONG THE MANY INTERTEXTS of Augusto Roa Bastos's *Yo el Supremo*, one of the most fascinating is Thomas Carlyle's 1843 essay on Doctor Francia, included in his *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*.¹ Carlyle's article is not a major documentary source for Roa, yet many of the concerns voiced in the 1843 essay are echoed in the 1974 novel. I shall examine Carlyle's essay in the light of Roa's novel, on the theory that the modern writer creates his precursors (Borges, *Obras completas* 678, 712). My reflections will also bear on the continuing discussions of the relations between literature and history, and between language and reality.

There are but three explicit references to the Carlyle essay in *Yo el Supremo*. In a footnote to a section concerning the 1811 junta which declared Paraguay's independence, after the quotations from Julio César Chaves and Justo Pastor Benítez, there is a fairly faithful translation of the following passage from Carlyle:

How Francia passed his days in such a region, where philosophy, as is too clear, was at the lowest ebb? Francia, like Quintus Fixlein, had "perennial fireproof joys, namely employments." He had much Law-business, a great and ever-increasing reputation as a man at once skilful and faithful in the management of causes for men. Then, in his leisure hours, he had his Volneys, Raynals; he had second-hand scientific treatises in French; he loved to "interrogate Nature," as they say; to possess theodolites, telescopes, star-

glasses,—any kind of glass or book, or gazing implement whatever, through which he might try to catch a glimpse of fact in this strange universe: poor Francia! Nay, it is said, his hard heart was not without inflammability: was sensible to those Andalusian eyes still bright in the tenth or twelfth generation. In such case too, it may have burnt, one would think, like anthracite, in a somewhat ardent manner. Rumors to this effect are afloat; not at once incredible. Pity there had not been some Andalusian pair of eyes, with speculation, depth and soul enough in the rear of them to fetter Dr. Francia permanently, and make a house-father of him. It had been better; but it befell not. As for that light-headed, smart brown girl whom, twenty years afterwards, you saw selling flowers on the streets of Assumpcion, and leading a light life, is there any certainty that she was Dr. Francia's daughter? Any certainty that, even if so, he could and should have done something considerable for her? Poor Francia; poor light-headed, smart brown girl,—this present Reviewer cannot say! (232)

The content of most of this quotation is present in Roa's novel, but not in exactly the same form.² For instance, when Roa rewrites³ the Carlyle quotation, he moves the reference to the mystery of Fact in a strange Universe from the middle to the beginning of the quoted passage. Similarly, he ends the quotation by having Carlyle cite Hamlet's speech on "Words, words, words," a reflection on the emptiness of words that would not be uncharacteristic of Carlyle. This is not terribly different in tone from the ending of the passage quoted above, but has the curious effect in Roa's text of including Carlyle in the radical questioning of language undertaken in the postmodernist novel.

The second reference is to Francia's father's deathbed request to see his son:

Basado en las obras de los Robertson y en otros testimonios, Thomas Carlyle, describe la escena con menos patetismo. Ante la súplica de reconciliación del anciano, que no se resigna a morir sin ver a su hijo y otorgarle mutuo perdón por temor de no poder entrar en el cielo si esto no ocurre, Carlyle hace decir a *El Supremo* simplemente: "Díganle que mis muchas ocupaciones no me permiten ir y, sobre todo, no tiene objeto". (310)

Carlyle's account of the "anecdote of Francia's dying Father" is based on hearsay: the author says that it "requires to be confirmed!" (262). It is a much sharper account of the conflict than Roa implies:

It seems, the old man, who, as we saw, had long since quarrelled with his son, was dying, and wished to be reconciled. Francia "was busy;—what use was it?—could not come." A second still more pressing message arrives: "The old father dare not die unless he see his son; fears he shall never enter Heaven, if they be not reconciled."—"Then let him enter—!" said Francia; "I will not come!" (262)

The word that Carlyle's time did not permit to be printed was of course "hell"; Roa recounts this latter exchange elsewhere in his account (310), but does not ascribe it to Carlyle. Carlyle himself gives Robertson as his source for the episode.

The final reference to Carlyle in *Yo el Supremo* is the briefest though potentially most significant of the three, because it refers not only to Carlyle's essay on Francia, but also to his other writings. Roa quotes a supposed text by the Supreme Dictator:

"No faltaron, sin embargo, algunos reparos y críticas. Thomas Carlyle, por ejemplo, nos trató duramente. El veía en el Supremo del Paraguay al hombre más notable de esa parte de América. Despedía una luz muy sulfurosa y sombría que brillaba en su espíritu—afirma el cultor de los Héroes—pero con ella iluminó el Paraguay lo mejor que pudo. En fin, opiniones adversas como las del gran Carlyle, en lugar de desmerecer nuestra obra aumentaron su prestigio por el hecho de que hombres de su talla la tuvieron en cuenta; lo que contribuyó muchísimo a su promoción y difusión." (327)⁴

The embedded quotation here comes from the following passage in the Carlyle essay:

We might define him [Francia] as the born enemy of quacks; one who has from nature a heart-hatred of *unveracity* in man or in thing, wheresoever he sees it. Of persons who do not speak the truth, and do not act the truth, he has a kind of diabolic-divine impatience; they had better disappear out of his neighborhood. Poor Francia: his light was but a very sulphurous, meagre, blue-burning one; but he irradiated Paraguay with it (as our Professor says) the best he could. (248)

The "heart-hatred of *unveracity*" informs Roa's novel as well, as when the dictator writes that he rejects "historias fingidas para diversión de lectores" as well as "Confesiones," "Pensamientos," and "Memorias

Intimas": "Esto es un Balance de Cuentas," he says (53).³ Later he argues that there should be laws against the writing of fiction (75).

The three references to the Carlyle essay send us to that text, which we discover looms a great deal larger in the light of Roa's novel than some of the other intertexts. Carlyle in his essay on Francia is concerned with several major questions that are also central to *Yo el Supremo* (as well as to Carlyle's other writings on history). He is concerned here with the problems associated with writing about history: the inadequacy of our knowledge of the past, the inadequacy of language,⁶ the relations between discourse and power, and the problem of translation. Like Roa, he insists on the necessity of looking at the world through Francia's eyes, and of understanding Francia on his own terms. Again like Roa, Carlyle is dissatisfied with the image of Francia provided in the sources that were available to him,⁷ and is engaged in trying to imagine a more rounded image of the Supreme Dictator.

Even more strikingly, the verbal play that is so notable a feature of Roa's novel has a worthy precursor in Carlyle. Carlyle notes that in the junta of 1811, Fulgencio Yegros was president and that two other unidentified men were *vocales*—which he interprets as vowels—and that Francia was thus of necessity the consonant or "motive soul of the combination" (237), and that Francia later resigned from the junta because he felt "that he, for one, could not be consonant to such a set of vowels" (238).⁸ He refers to liberal democracy as "Donothingism," proclaiming (with an echo of *Macbeth*): "Donothingism doth murder sleep!" (238), and speaks of aristocracy as "Fatpauncho Usandwonto" (236), anticipating Roa's reference to "Panzancho" (65).

Carlyle's main concern in his essay on Francia is with recovering the dictator's image and speech. This concern is voiced early in the essay in his review of the difficulties Europeans have had in forming an image of the heroes of South American history—Bolívar, San Martín, O'Higgins, Artigas, Francia⁹—and of the extent to which bad translations and untrustworthy accounts have contributed to this state of ignorance (249). Several times Carlyle refers here to the paucity of documents available to him as he writes, which, he says offer him "no facts, but broken shadows of facts" (223). Carlyle asks how "any picture of Francia [is] to be fabricated" out of partisan accounts of Francia's cruelty (223-24), and argues that Francia needs to be looked at not through Rengger's or Robertson's eyes "but faithfully through his own eyes" (224). He also remarks on how "[o]ne desiderates some Biography of Francia by a native!" (245).¹⁰

In the most striking passage of the essay for the reader acquainted with *Yo el Supremo*, Carlyle writes:

The Paraguenos can in many cases spell and read, but they are not a literary people; and, indeed, this Doctor was, perhaps, too awful a practical phenomenon to be calmly treated of in the literary way. . . . Francia, Dictator of Paraguay, is, at present, to the European mind, little other than a chimera;¹¹ at best, the statement of a puzzle, to which the solution is still to seek. As the Paraguenos, though not a literary people, can many of them spell and write, and are not without a discriminating sense of true and untrue, why should not some real *Life of Francia*, from those parts, be still possible! If a writer of genius arise there, he is hereby invited to the enterprise. (216-17)

This passage, never cited in Roa's novel, surely constitutes one of the challenges why he, a native of Paraguay and a writer of genius, should undertake the formidable task of writing a critical biography of Francia,¹² that one man in Paraguay who, according to Carlyle, "understands in his heart that this Universe is an eternal Fact—and not some huge temporary Pumpkin, saccharine, absinthian" (238). Then again, Carlyle remarks: "Who knows but, in unborn centuries, Paragueno men will look back to their lean iron Francia, as men do in such cases to the one veracious person, and institute considerations!" (253),¹³ predicting a revisionist view of Francia that would only break into print a hundred years after the composition of his own essay with Chaves's massive *Yo el Supremo Dictador* (1942).¹⁴

Roa's third reference to the Carlyle essay describes the Scottish writer as "cultor de los Héroes," referring no doubt to Carlyle's lectures *On Heroes and Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841), well known for the idea championed in them that history is shaped by great men. The studies in this work of Dante, Shakespeare, Cromwell, Napoleon and others, however, are perhaps less germane to Roa's novel than is the brief essay "On History" (1830).

In his essay on history, Carlyle notes that "all men are historians," since "[o]ur very speech is curiously historical" (56), and asserts that we do nothing but enact history, and that our spiritual life is built on history (56). Yet he also examines the impossibility of writing history:

Social Life is the aggregate of all the individual men's Lives who constitute society; History is the essence of innumerable Biographies. But if one Biography, nay, our own Biography, study and recapitulate it as we may, remains in so many points unintelligible to us; how much more must these million, the very fact of which, to say nothing of the purport of them, we know not, and cannot know! (57)

Further on he observes: "Of our History the more important part is lost without recovery" (58). He studies the difference between historical events and historical narrative, noting that even the most gifted historian must simplify the tangle of events, reading simultaneous events as successive ones (60), and finding patterns of causality far simpler than those that operated in fact. He summarizes his discussion of this idea in the memorable phrase: "Narrative is *linear*, Action is *solid*" (60).¹⁵ Finally, near the end of the essay, he formulates the modern idea that History is textual and susceptible of endless interpretation:

Yet in that complex Manuscript, covered over with formless intricately entangled unknown characters,—nay, which is a *Palimpsest*, and had once prophetic writing, still dimly legible there,—some letters, some words, may be deciphered; and if not complete Philosophy, here and there an intelligent precept, available in practice, be gathered: well understanding, in the mean while, that it is only a little portion we have deciphered; that much still remains to be interpreted; that History is a real Prophetic Manuscript, and can be fully interpreted by no man. (61)¹⁶

He concludes the essay with a reference to his "growing feeling of the infinite nature of History" (62). Carlyle's concern with what he called the "historical imagination" is central to this essay as to others of his writings. One of Carlyle's modern critics, John Rosenberg, has commented in *Carlyle and the Burden of History*:

The phrase *historical imagination* contains a seeming contradiction: *history* suggests a narrative of facts and *imagination* the invention of fictions. But for Carlyle the contrary of history is not fiction but oblivion, the unravelling of the collective human memory that holds civilization together. History is not a record of civilization; it is civilization itself, the past speaking to the present and to the future through the voice of the historian. (15)

Yet, if civilization is history, then civilization is as precarious as the historical text itself: fragmentary, mutable, partial. The historian's enterprise is not terribly different from the reader's, because both require imagination, and because History is conceived as an infinite text. Carlyle, the Carlyle of the essay on Dr. Francia and "Of History," is a writer whose pages presage those of Borges and Roa Bastos. The Carlyle we rediscover through Roa Bastos is not unlike the Cervantes found in the pages of Pierre Menard's *Quijote*, and his concept of history, like Menard's, "no define la historia como una indagación de la realidad sino

como su origen. La verdad histórica, para él, no es lo que sucedió; es lo que juzgamos que sucedió" (Borges, *Obras completas* 448).

It goes almost without saying that this Carlyle, and his philosophy of history, is vastly more important as theoretical underpinning for *Yo el Supremo* than is Chaves's *El supremo dictador* or the other historical studies mentioned in the novel. Roa's relation to Carlyle is dialogical in a fuller sense than is his relation to Chaves and the other historians, because Carlyle's text reveals itself as polyphonic and ambivalent, and is thus closer to Roa's own project.

Gillian Beer has said of Carlyle's style that it "seems sometimes to devour the reader," that it "demands the reader's resistance and draws energy from that resistance. The reader is to be not only spiritually and intellectually involved, but bodily too. The struggle with the reader is a struggle to collapse stable categories" (77). This image of the text's wrestling with the reader is wonderfully apt as a description of *Yo el Supremo*, and as with Carlyle, it is an unequal struggle, ending in the defeat of many readers, precisely because of the unwillingness of many to let their stable categories be collapsed.

Gerald Martin has brilliantly observed (with regard to the three "dictator novels" coincidentally published in 1974) that "of all the major Latin American novelists of the past 25 years, Carpentier and García Márquez are perhaps the most certain, over the course of their entire literary production, that the world can be denoted and that stories can be simply narrated, whereas Roa Bastos' uncertainty on this self-same subject was the very point of departure for *Hijo de hombre*" (77) and, of course, much more radically for *Yo el Supremo*. This recognition of the impossibility of history, though associated in the novel with Musil,¹⁷ is also closely linked with Carlyle, for whom "History is a real Prophetic Manuscript, and can be fully interpreted by no man": a palimpsest we erase as we write, a manuscript in which we, too, are written.¹⁸

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1. An earlier writer to take notice of Carlyle's essay on Francia in Latin America was the Franco-Argentine Paul Groussac, who refers at length to Carlyle's discussion of the gaucho: "El gran Carlyle, en un admirable ensayo sobre el doctor Francia, dictador del Paraguay—en que prodiga un poco el *humour* a expensas de nuestros héroes sudamericanos—adivinó la fisonomía real del gaucho, indolente, estoico, desaliñado: en suma, pintoresco, por más que 'carezca a menudo de jabón,' como dice el ensayista inglés. Este le ha pintado como él sabe pintar, con esa intuición aguda del vidente, ese arrojado de pincel y exuberancia de color que nuestro mismo Michelet nunca ha sobrepujado" (116).

2. The translation of the Carlyle passage in *Yo el Supremo* is as follows: "Extraño universo el de tal hombre de quien se murmura que poseía un corazón endurecido, semejante al de Quintus Fixlein, a prueba de fuego, puesto que las únicas seducciones a las que

cedía eran sus ocupaciones. Otros aseguran, sin embargo, que no dejaba de inflamarse y era sensible a esos ojos andaluces que todavía brillan en la décima o duodécima generación. Se nos ocurre que, en tales casos, ha de haber adivido como la astucia como la antracita, según dicen fulguraban sus ojos en su cara de urubú. Hay rumores flotantes al respecto.

"¡Pobre Supremo! Lástima que no haya habido un par de estos ojos con la suficiente inteligencia, profundidad y alma para haberlo aprisionado de una manera permanente convirtiéndolo en un virtuoso padre de familia. ¿Hay, por otra parte, alguna certidumbre de que fuera hija de El Supremo aquella joven atolondrada, morena, vivaracha, de vida desordenada, que veinte años después vendía flores por las calles de Asunción? Nada más que sombras, sombras, sombras. ¡Palabras, palabras, palabras!, dijo Hamlet, el melancólico príncipe de Dinamarca por boca de nuestro Shakespeare!" (207n.).

3. On intertextuality in *Yo el Supremo* see, among many others, Milagros Ezquerro, Wladimir Krynski, and my article on worms.

4. Of interest with regard to the diffusion of Doctor Francia's name is the inclusion of him in the Comtist Calendar. See Morley's article on Comte in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 6: 818.

5. This and the famous passage in which the dictator announces that his private notebook is a ledger with parallel columns marked "Debe" and "Haber" or Debit and Credit (22-23n.) may have an ironic relation to a phrase in Carlyle's essay "On History," in which Carlyle writes: "He who reads the inscrutable Book of Nature as if it were a Merchant's Ledger, is justly suspected of having never seen that Book" (62).

6. This is a frequent theme of Carlyle's writing. In the lecture on Dante and Shakespeare in *On Heroes* he affirms: "Speech is great; but Silence is greater" (108).

7. Roa writes: "Yo no pretendía hacer una novela histórica ni una biografía novelada, ninguno de esos productos híbridos que simulan una falsa verosimilitud. [...] Mi 'proyecto' de novela consistió, pues, en un primer momento, en escribir una *contrahistoria*, una réplica subversiva y transgresiva de la historiografía oficial" ("Algunos núcleos generadores" 78). However, there is a difference between the revisionist readings of Francia being practiced by Carlyle and Roa. Carlyle is writing against the "black legend" of Francia popularized in Europe by Robertson and Rengger. Roa is writing against the Paraguayan nationalist version of Francia perpetuated by the government of Alfredo Stroessner: see, for instance, the documents appended to the novel (457-65). For an intelligent commentary on the politics of Roa's interpretation of Francia, see Carlos Pacheco (163, 176).

8. See also a little later in the essay: "Francia is the Consonant of these absurd 'Vowels'; no business can go on without Francia!" (240). According to Chaves (119), the Congress of June 1811 chose Yegros as president and the following four "vocales": Francia, Cavallero, Bogarin and de la Mora. Francia resigned as a "vocal" in October of the same year (132).

9. Augustus Ralli aptly states that Carlyle "approaches his matter circuitously" (261).

10. Cf. also the following: "For the rest, it is not given to this or as yet to any editor, till a Biography arrive from Paraguay, to shape out with the smallest clearness, a representation of Francia's existence as an Assumption Advocate; the scene is so distant, the conditions of it so unknown" (228).

11. Roa no doubt is referring to this passage when he has the dictator say: "La quimera ha ocupado el lugar de mi persona. Tiendo a ser 'lo quimérico'. Broma famosa que llevará mi nombre. Busca la palabra 'quimera' en el diccionario, Patiño. *Idea falsa, desvarío, falsa imaginación* dice, Excelencia. Eso voy siendo en la realidad y en el papel. También dice, Señor: *Monstruo fabuloso que tenía cabeza de león, vientre de cabra y cola de dragón. Dicen que eso fui. Agrega el diccionario todavía, Excelencia: Nombre de un pez y de una mariposa. Pendencia. Riña*. Todo eso fui, y nada de eso. El diccionario es un osario de palabra vacías" (15). Most of the various dictionary definitions are drawn from Borges's *Libro de los seres imaginarios*, as is also the reference to Rabelais just prior to the passage cited here (*Obras completas en colaboración* 685); the reference to the dictionary (already stated on page 10 of the novel) is paraphrased from Cortázar's *Rayuela* (270, 278-79). The association of the chimera with Doctor Francia, however, is found only in Carlyle.

12. The only critic of *Yo el Supremo* to comment on Roa's use of Carlyle at any length is

Jean Franco in "El pasquín y los diálogos de los muertos" (183-84); Franco is mostly concerned here with the antidemocratic bent of Carlyle's thought, though she does quote his prophetic words about some future Paraguayan writer of genius. An interesting recent analysis of Carlyle's ideological stance in the essay on Dr. Francia (without, however, any reference to Roa Bastos) is Frederick Sturton Weaver's "Thomas Carlyle on Dr. Francia: The Functional Role of the Carlylean Hero."

13. In *On Heroes*, in the essay on Mahomet, Carlyle proposes this definition of the Hero: "A Hero [...] has this first distinction, which indeed we may call first and last, the Alpha and Omega of his whole Heroism, that he looks through the shows of things into things" (55).

14. For other revisionist views of Francia, see Richard Alan White, *Paraguay's Autonomous Revolution*, and José Antonio Vázquez's introduction to a fascinating collection of documents, *El doctor Francia visto y oído por sus contemporáneos*. On Chaves, see my article, "Roa's Julio César: Commentaries and Reflections."

15. Rosenberg quotes from Carlyle's notebooks (entry dated 8 January 1828) an earlier formulation of this idea: "(An Historian must write in *lines*; but every event is a *superficies*)" (qtd. in Rosenberg 43).

16. Cf. Borges on Menard: "He reflexionado que es licito ver en el Quijote 'final' una especie de palimpsesto, en el que deben traslucirse los rastros—tenues pero no indescifrables—de la 'previa' escritura de nuestro amigo. Desgraciadamente, sólo un segundo Pierre Menard, invirtiendo el trabajo del anterior, podría exhumar y resucitar esas Troyas" (*Obras completas* 450).

17. At the end of the compiler's final note, we read: "El a-copiador declara, con palabras de un autor contemporáneo, que la historia encerrada en estos Apuntes se reduce al hecho de que la historia que en ella debió ser narrada no ha sido narrada" (467). Krynski has commented at length on Roa's use of this phrase from Musil's *Man Without Qualities* (422).

18. I am recalling here the last sentence of Borges's "Magias parciales del Quijote": "En 1833, Carlyle observó que la historia universal es un infinito libro sagrado que todos los hombres escriben y leen y tratan de entender, y en el que también los escriben" (*Obras completas* 669). The reference is obviously to the 1830 essay "On History" discussed above, though the date given is incorrect.

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