Roa's Julio César: Commentaries and Reflections

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"...le texte de Bastos [sic] dynamise l'histoire et en démontre les limites. De même, l'histoire dynamise le roman et en révèle les limites."
—Kryński, 422

"...a mode of truth, not of truth coherent and central, but angular and splintered."
—De Quincey, qtd. in Borges, 99

The relation of historical novelists to their sources is often problematic, as the novelist uses documents in ways different from the historian. The major source of a historical novel may be a text that provides information, ideas or descriptive material to be utilized, yet may hardly function as a "source" in the more usual literary sense of the term.1 Roa Bastos, in Yo el Supremo, seeks to put the whole discussion of the historical novelist's relation to his sources on a new footing, since he incorporates vast amounts of the writing

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2 Interestingly enough, the title Roa uses to speak of the Supreme Dictator, "el Supremo," was apparently first used in a novel in 1916 written and published in English by Edward Lucas White. On this novel, see Richard Alan White, Paraguay's Autonomous Revolution 138. Karl Kohut calls the Edward Lucas White novel "uno de los documentos más curiosos de la leyenda blanca" (148). The formula "Yo el Supremo" is no doubt modeled on the Spanish royal formula "Yo el Rey," but was apparently not in fact used by Dr. Francia, whose signature in the various documents published in the firm issue of the Anuario de Investigaciones Historicas Dr. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia is either his full name "a secas" or the name in addition to one of the following titles: "El Dictador" (40) or "Ddictador de la República del Paraguay" (41).

3 Milagros Esqueria in her introduction to the Cátedra edition of Yo el Supremo terms the Chaves book the major source for information about Doctor Francia in Roa's novel (43), a judgment with which I concur completely. See also article by Georges Martin.

4 See Benveniste's essays "Relations of Person in the Verb," "The Correlatives of Tense in the French Verb," and "The Nature of Pronouns" in Problems in General Linguistics. The pertinence of Benveniste's distinction between Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia's story to Yo el Supremo has already been briefly noted by Rodolfo Borelo in "Relazion historico, relaza novelesco: problemas" (103, 112).

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affirming a relation between his revisionist study of Francia and Julius Caesar's self-

serving memoirs of his campaigns. I propose here to point out a few instances of the uses

Roas makes of the vast materials collected by Chaves on the Supreme Dictator.

One curious aspect of Chaves study is the strong novelistic component of his writing,
an element of course never absent from narrative histories, but one which is often

repressed or avoided in such works to the extent possible. Chaves portrays Francia as

something of a Byronic hero at times strikingly similar to Sarmiento's portrait of Juan

Facundo Quiroga. His concern with the resemblance of the events and characters of his

account to those in a novel can be seen for instance in his portrayal of the Brazilian

emissary Correia da Câmara, to be commented on later.

Roas draws on Chaves' study of the Supreme Dictator in a variety of different ways.

There are a number of explicit quotations from Chaves, although as already clarified the

author is called "Julio César" and the work referred to as his commentaries. These

quotations can be located in El Supremo Dictador, and are usually accurate transcriptions

of Chaves. A first example occurs on page 105 of the novel, in a discussion of the congress

of July 1810:

Mostremos lo que somos y debemos ser, evitando ser subyugados por nadie que no

sea nuestro legítimo Soberano. Este fue el argumento Aguilés de los españolistas

daquella emergencia, escribe Julio César en sus Comentarios. (105)

The last sentence is in fact a quotation from Chaves (93), with two minor changes. Much

of the preceding page and a half of the novel is also derived from the paragraph of Chaves

which culminates in the sentence quoted.

A more complex instance of quotation from Chaves is the long note on pages 178 and

179 of the novel, which is wholly derived from Julio César's commentaries. The

information in the note is in fact derived from pages 153 and 154 of the Chaves book,

but is so completely rearranged and rewritten that a comparison of the two accounts is

somewhat bewildering. With regard to Gregorio de la Cerda, for instance, Chaves writes:

Robertson retrasado a este pintoresco personaje: era el hombre más popular de la

ciudad, derivando su prestigio de ser padrino de un gran número de criaturas de

familias de rango, lo que le valía el título de padrino universal: "Ninguno fué más

rico en alijados que don Gregorio, y por tanto, a nadie en América tan poderoso.

Si alguien deseara llegar a ser en aquel país más personaje de primera fila, dese muíta

para ser padrino general." (153)

Roas writes:

Era un cordobés pintoresco, famoso por ser compadre de medio mundo. Lo que

otorga gran respetabilidad en el Paraguay. Alguna vez habrá que marcar la

influencia del compadrazgo en el desenvolvimiento de nuestra política. (179)

The commentary on the importance of compadrazgo derives not from Chaves but from

Robertson, who writes: "No man was ever so rich in godchildren as Don Gregorio; and

therefore no man I ever saw in America was so potent. If a man wishes to become, in that

country, a first-rate character, let him lay himself out to become a general godfather"

(1:323). Via Chaves and Robertson, Roas proposes a "tema de tesis," perhaps recalling the

numerous such themes proposed jocularly in Cortés's Rayuela (225, 274 and elsewhere).

Interestingly enough, he neglects to transcribe a delightful anecdote quoted by Chaves from

5 See Hayden White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," in The Content of the

Form.

6 As usual, Roa is politically prescient in these remarks. Today, after the overthrow of Stroessner (an event

one of the consequences of which has been permission for Roa to return to Paraguay), the former dictator has

been replaced by his compadre General Rodríguez.

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Robertston. According to the latter, Francia sent a message to de la Cerda warning him not

to set foot in Paraguay "aunque sea para visitar a sus comadres" (154). Later in the

same note, Roa writes of de la Cerda:

Mozo ebrio, las más de las veces en total estado de bebede en las reuniones de la

Junta misma, se halla incursio también en el delito de ser espía e informante del

Triunvirato de Buenos Aires, en la persona del doctor Chilacana, manteniéndolo al

tanto de las actividades y resoluciones de nuestro Gobierno. (179)

This passage is set off with quotation marks, thus asserting its origin in Chaves' text,

which is and is not the case. The initial phrase is quoted by Chaves from a document

penned by Francia in 1813, in which the future Supreme Dictator terms Cerda inadequate

for the post of Vocal "por ser un Mozo ebrio: no puede hacer aprecio por el poco

conocimiento que tenía de sus circunstancias, pero después te he tenido con dolor la

experiencia de que efectivamente era excesivamente dado a la bebida en términos de

cometerse a veces su turbación y ebriedad estando en la Junta misma" (152-53). The

final phrase occurs a full page later, though once again not in exactly the same form:

"Principal cargo contra Cerda era el de que informaba al doctor Chilacana—miembros [sic]

del Triunvirato porteño—de las actividades y resoluciones de la Junta" (154).

In addition to the explicit quotations from Chaves, whether faithful to the original or

not, there are numerous embedded quotations from Chaves, and from other authors derived

by Roa from Chaves. For an instance of the first kind of implicit quotation, let us look at

page 324 of the novel:

El en la conferencia que sostiene en Potosí con los zorros porteños Alvear y Díaz

Vélez, don Simón vuelve a plantear su ambición "redencionista" el 8 de octubre de

1825. Voy a proponer a ustedes, les dice, una idea neutral. ¡Vaya con la idea neutral!

Señores, les dice, he hecho reconocer el Pilcomayo y procurador adquirir todos los conocimientos

posibles para proporcionarme la mejor ruta del Paraguay con el proyecto de ir a esa

provincia, echar por tierra a ese tirano y libertar a Bonpland amigo a quien aprecio

singularmente." (393)

The whole passage, then, is based closely on Chaves, indeed more closely than some of the

quotations identified as such in Yo el Supremo. There are many such passages in the

novel, derived directly from Chaves but not explicitly so.

In addition, there are numerous passages from a great variety of authors quoted not

from the originals but from Chaves' transcriptions of them. That this is the case can be

confirmed by consulation of the original sources, which reveals that many of the

quotations are co-extensive with the quoted materials in Chaves, and that material translated

into Spanish from various foreign languages is present in the same form in Roa and in

7 The fuller account by Robertson of his words and deeds is too delightful to be slighted here. Robertson

reports that he said to Dr. Francia: "that I presumed I might be permitted to console Don Gregorio by being

allowed to become the medium of communication between him and his comadres. Smiling at the allusion,

Francia said to me—"Mr. Robertson, do what you please in the way of go-between in this case. Don Gregorio

has too many comadres, and pays too much attention to them, ever to be a formidable rival of mine... But...do

what you will. Only let him beware how he ever again sets foot in Paraguay, even to revisit his comadres." (2:20-21)

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Chaves. Examples of such quoted material include the letter from Artigas to Francia (86n.), identical with the letter as quoted by Chaves (275), and the document by but in fact derived from Chaves (246n.).

One of the most interesting of the embedded quotations is derived ultimately from Correia da Câmara’s memoirs of his diplomatic missions to Paraguay, published in the Anais do Itamaraty, but consistently quoted by Roa from Chaves’ ‘translations’ of Correia da Câmara, which are also of course translations of the documents from Portugal into own footnotes as his sources, Roa thus misleads the reader into thinking that the compiler references to the volumes of the Anais are themselves misleading, since he often conflates quotations from different passages (quoted by Chaves) into a single quotation, and then attributes this quotation to one or another of the pages of the original Anais.

On page 376, quoting from Chaves’ page 386, Roa quotes Correia da Câmara, who in turn clarifies that he is speaking to Ortellado’s secretary.8

¡Un paso más, senhor Roa, en el camino de los insultos, y conocerá el Gobierno Paraguayo hasta qué punto el representante del Imperio sabe sustentar la dignidad de su eminente carácter y la ofendida majestad de su soberano! (376)

A footnote appended below this quotation, referring back to the surname of Ortellado’s secretary, reads as follows:

El compilador deseaba aclarar que el lapsus y la noción no le corresponden, el informe confidencial de Correia menciona textualmente el apellido, según puede consultarse en el tomo IV de Anais, p. 60. (376)

Apart from a few minor emendations in Chaves’ translation, from which a few dependent clauses are omitted, the most important change suffered by the translation is orthographic: the title before the surname Roa, spelled “senhor” by Chaves, is retranslated by Roa into “señor,” another false clue to the reader who is thus made to think that Roa’s source here is the Portuguese original and not Chaves’ translation.10

When one consults the original text of the letter from Correia da Câmara to the foreign minister, the Marques de Aracaty, as published in the Anais do Itamaraty in 1838, one finds a further confirmation of the fact that Roa drew on Chaves and not on the original text, which reads as follows:

Mais hum passo, Senhor Roas, na Estrada exoanhavida dos insultos, e conhecerão o Governo Paraguayo, e o seu Delegado, o bem a pezar seu até que ponto o Representante do imperio sabe sustentar a Dignidade do seu Eminentíssimo Caractar, e a Magestade ofendida da seu SOBERANO... (4:61-62)

The surname as it appears in the Anais is Roas, not Roa, and the page number does not correspond to the one cited by Roa and by Chaves. Throughout the letter to the foreign minister, the Brazilian ambassador speaks of one Roas; Chaves, who studied the period in great detail, no doubt had good reason to emend the spelling, but no more conclusive evidence could be offered of our author’s reliance on the work of the Paraguayan historian.12

A note about Correia da Câmara in the novel is explicitly and almost wholly derived from Chaves’ discussion of the Brazilian ambassador. Roa writes:

Personaje de tinta extraordinarios. Ninguno llamado como él por su vida noble, por su carácter aventurero, a escribir el capítulo dramático de una entrada al aislado Paraguay; su viaje, su estada en Asunción y en Itapúa, su negociación en la capital, forman una novela plena de apasionante interés. Guererro en la India, combatiente en Portugal, prisionero de Napoleón, viajero en Turquía, revolucionario en Río de Janeiro, amigo íntimo de José Bonifacio, devoto de las muías... golpeando las puertas del Paraguay en la gua de revelar la Esfinge. Tal hombre para tal misión. (211n.)

This note is condensed slightly from Chaves (353-54), whose account includes the double reference to the resemblance of the ambassador’s life to episodes of a novel.

A major episode in Roa’s novel is the scene in which Doctor Francia, in the midst of his habitual ride around Asunción (described in great detail by Chaves, 203), encounters a priest and a group of acolytes who are carrying the last rites or “viaticum” to a dying man. In Roa’s novel, Francia suffers from this encounter as if from the evil eye, has some kind of attack, and falls from his horse; he is then carried back to his house and dies shortly thereafter. The scene in the novel is heightened by the fantastic detail of a swarm of blind birds that fall to their death at the dictator’s feet (an evident allusion to Hamlet’s speech on the fall of the sparrow), with further allusions to Poe’s “The Raven” and Lear’s great speech that culminates in the line “Never never never never never.”13 The incident is not based directly on the death of Francia, which occurred of natural causes within the walls of his house in CUR. Rather it provides elements from which Roa elaborated his account. The first of these elements is a reference to the fact that even in the last months of his life, when he was sick and feeble, Francia continued to take his ride around Asunción, although he was too weak to take it every day (459-60). The second is an episode that occurred several years before Francia’s death, during one of his daily rides:

En un atardecer, un sacerdote conducía el viático para un moribundo, acompañado de un grupo de fieles. De súbito los acompañantes huyeron desvencijados y el religioso se encontró completamente solo; en un extremo de la calle aparecía a caballo Francisco Roa, que retornaba de su paseo diario. El cura se acercó y pidió permiso de la hostia, pero el jinete pasó de largo, sin descubrirse siquiera. Sólo cuando se perdió a lo lejos regresaron los temerosos fieles. (323)

Roa is clearly using this incident (an excellent example of the already mentioned novelistic aspects of Chaves’ historical study) as his primary source when he has the Dictator describe his last ride:

A propósito de la Historia de las Revoluciones de la Provincia del Paraguay mencioné esta mañana al jefe de la oficina de la Revista Lozano. Lélo el manuscrito en el Cuartel del hospital durante mi internación a raíz de la caída en el último paseo. Si he de dar razón al testimonio de mis señores debo escribir que esa tarde vino a Pedro Lozano en

Jorge Ruffinelli comments briefly on the appearance of the surname Roa in the novel in his essay “Roa Bastos: el origen de una gran novela” (141). Ruffinelli terms the appearance of the surname an anachronism, thus implying a (mistaken) belief that the name does not appear in the original manuscript.

The consular official in Itapúa, Norberto Ortellado, is also mentioned in the novel (286, 373).

Juan Manuel Marcos, for instance, apparently takes Roa at his word when he writes: “La cita es casi literal, recogida de los Anais do Itamaraty, IV [Río de Janeiro, 1938], citada en Chaves, p. 363” (86).

It would appear that Roa was a fairly common surname in Paraguay in the nineteenth century. A Vicente Roa, in Yo el Supremo a mutilado named José Fernando Roa is mentioned once (192).

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12 Two other highly significant passages in the ambassador’s letter read: “Tenho entendido, Senhor Roas, disse ao Secretário que saiba da viagem em que nós pás a nossa respectiva posição Topográfica, cada vez nós conhecemos menos huns aos outros...” (Anais, 4:61) and “Não estou satisfeito o Governo Paraguay com ter atado a Legação Brasileira ao pestileto solo de Itapúa de tantos Mezes a esta parte; não lhe basta a ter posio o Ministro Publico do imperio em hum miserável Cinelar, alojamento de índios, e no alojamento dous mesmos índios; cercado de Lapanaros, que o avizinhão de todos os laços; cobertos de terra, e de agua, que lhe envolva imensas goietas, devorado de insectos, e de sveandijas os mais asqueirosos; tem é caso por pouco o haver feito fatal a hum criminoso a quarenta e cinco passos das portas deste indigo alojamento? ? ?... O Governo Dicrtorial deve ter bem presente, que as Nações sões pôr severamente certos insultos...” (4:62).

13 See my essay “Easter-Reception and De-Composition: Worms in Yo el Supremo.”

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There are further references to this incident on pages 422 and 450-451 of the novel. It is in this scene more than any other that Roa's reworking of the historical record can be observed. Several different episodes from Chaves' narrative are fused: the ride around Asunción taken routinely by the Dictator over a period of years, the episode several years before his death of an encounter with a priest and delegation carrying the last rites to someone, and the information about the Dictator's final illness. By linking the encounter with the delegation bearing the last rites with the fit suffered by the Dictator that results in his death, Roa suggests that the omnipotent Dictator (who speaks to us from the grave) has in fact encountered the group that was coming to administer the last rites to him. This encounter—which is of course undocumented in the standard histories—is supernatural in import, and the fantastic and macabre elements are highlighted by the allusions to Hamlet, Lear, and "The Raven." The reiterates references to Chaves may seem to imply that his book contributed actively to the elaboration of Roa's novel. Indeed it does, but in a negative sense. For, while Chaves exhibits a confidence that his subject is knowable, Roa here as in most of his other writing expresses a profound disbelief in the adequacy of language in general, and of narrative history in particular, for the representation of reality. In the novel, this skepticism is stated in the form of a quotation from Robert Musil: "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)

The historical materials on Doctor Francia change sign, form and shape on passing from one literary system (Chaves' narrative history) to another (Roa's metaphorical novel), yet Roa's skepticism as to whether the subject of history is knowable results not in indifference but in greater urgency: "Escribir no significa convertir lo real en palabras sino hacer que la palabra sea real." (67).

Frederic Jameson's Lacanian formulation is apt: [History is not a text, not a narrative, but... as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and... our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious.]

What matters about Roa's radical rereading of Chaves is not only the "prior textualization" to which Doctor Francia is subject, but also this urgent—and impossible—appeal to a reality beyond the text.

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The Dynamics of Inter-cultural Dissonance in *Gringo viejo*

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One of the more notable motifs to unfold in Carlos Fuentes’ *Gringo viejo* is that of the troubled relationship that exists between Mexico and the United States of America. Their common border has been variously described as a cactus curtain or tortilla curtain and, more pointedly in the present novel, as a “cicatrice.” That is, the Rio Grande or Rio Bravo del Norte is portrayed as a festering scar resulting from the amputation of the greater part of the present United States Southwest from the body politic of Mexico proper.

In contrast, the border separating the United States of America and its northern neighbor, Canada, is distinguished by its friendship arch, the International Peace Garden established in the 1920s, and the celebration of friendship days in border cities. Furthermore, it is renowned as being the longest unguarded border in the world. Borders, then, can be more than mere administrative conveniences (or inconveniences, as the case may be) that delineate discrete political entities. They can be, as well, significant boundary markers between two contrasting philosophies of life, or between two dissonant ethos

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1 Carlos Fuentes, *Gringo viejo*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985. Unless otherwise noted, all references are to this edition and are noted parenthetically in the body of the text.