

## 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."  
—Krysinski, 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.<sup>1</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> The relations between fiction and history in Latin America have been widely discussed in the last few years. See especially several collections of essays: González Echevarría, ed., *Historia y ficción en la narrativa latinoamericana*; Balderston, ed., *The Historical Novel in Latin America*; and Sosnowski, ed., *Augusto Roa Bastos y la producción cultural americana*.

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on Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia directly and indirectly into his own text, and preserves the contradictory nature of much of this evidence. Thus, he constantly reminds his reader of the necessary proliferation of texts, rereadings, and reinterpretations of the Supreme Dictator of Paraguay.<sup>2</sup>

Roa's major source is the study *El Supremo Dictador* by Julio César Chaves, first published in 1942 and reissued in expanded and revised versions over the following twenty years.<sup>3</sup> Though Chaves provides the bulk of the information about Francia, his contribution to the thematics and style of the novel is minimal. In contrast, a number of works (both literary and historical) that are mentioned only in passing, or not at all, are centrally important to an understanding of the genesis of Roa's novel. A silenced but central theoretical text is Benveniste's famous work on structural linguistics, notably his discussions of the personal pronouns (which informs the YO/EL distinction in the novel) and of the distinctions in Romance verb forms between history and discourse.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Borges is mentioned but once in the novel, yet his concept of the interrelations between texts has bearing on the novel, as does the concept of "intertextuality," developed by Julia Kristeva in the very years Roa Bastos was composing or compiling his novel in France.

Kristeva's initial (and highly influential) definition of intertextuality in "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (1969) attributes the concept (but not the term) to Bakhtin:

[E]ach word (text) is an intersection of word (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read... [A]ny text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double. (66)

A few years later, in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she adds:

The term *inter-textuality* denotes this transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another; but since this term has often been understood in the banal sense of 'study of sources,' we prefer the term *transposition* because it specifies that the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation of the thetic—of enunciative and denotative positionality. If one grants that every signifying practice is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems (an inter-textuality), one then understands that its 'place' of enunciation and its denoted 'object' are never single, complete, and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated. (59-60)

This revised formulation is particularly apt for *Yo el Supremo* because of the assertion that transpositions of text involve transformations of signifying systems and the shattering of the (mythical) unitary text.

*Yo el Supremo* is a textual patchwork of great complexity, and the significance of the fragments employed in it can only be evaluated piece by piece. Chaves is referred to throughout the novel as "Julio César" and his study as his "comentarios," ironically

<sup>2</sup> 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* 13n. 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 first issue of the *Anuario del Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas* 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 "Dictador de la República del Paraguay" (41).

<sup>3</sup> Milagros Ezquerro 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.

<sup>4</sup> See Benveniste's essays "Relations of Person in the Verb," "The Correlations of Tense in the French Verb," and "The Nature of Pronouns" in *Problems in General Linguistics*. The pertinence of Benveniste's distinction between discourse and history to *Yo el Supremo* has already been briefly noted by Rodolfo Borello in "Relato histórico, relato novelesco: problemas" (103, 112).

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 Roa 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,<sup>5</sup> 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.

Roa 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 Aquiles* de los españoles de aquella 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 purports to be 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 ha retratado 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 ahijados que don Gregorio, y por tanto, a nadie vi en América tan poderoso. Si alguien desea llegar a ser en aquel país más personaje de primera fila, dese maña para ser padrino general." (153)

Roa 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)<sup>6</sup>

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, Roa proposes a "tema de tesis," perhaps recalling the numerous such themes proposed jocularly in Cortázar'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.

Robertson. 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).<sup>7</sup>

Later in the same note, Roa writes of de la Cerda:

Mozo ebrio, las más de las veces en total estado de beodez en las reuniones de la Junta misma, se halla incurso también en el delito de ser espía e informante del Triunvirato de Buenos Aires, en la persona del doctor Chiclana, 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 Moso ébrio: no pude hacer aprecio por el poco conocimiento que tenía de sus circunstancias, pero después he tenido con dolor la experiencia de que efectivamente era excesivamente dado a la bebida en términos de conocerse 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 Chiclana—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:

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 neutra. ¡Vaya con la idea neutra! Señores, les dice, he hecho reconocer el Pilcomayo en toda su extensión hasta su desembocadura para proporcionarme la mejor ruta del Paraguay con el proyecto de irme a esa Provincia, echar por tierra a ese tirano. (324)

Chaves, who is not mentioned in the novel as the source of this quotation from Bolívar, writes the following:

Mientras tanto, el Libertador iniciaba sus conferencias en Potosí con los plenipotenciarios Alvear y Díaz Vélez. Volvió a poner sobre el tapete el proyecto: "Voy a proponer a Vdes. una idea neutra que tengo para ver que piensan de ella. He hecho reconocer el Pilcomayo y procurado 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 consultation 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)

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 Pueyrredón (321), reproduced in cursive script as if taken from an autograph document, 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' quotations of Correia da Câmara, which are also of course translations of the documents from Portuguese into Spanish. Quoting Correia da Câmara in Chaves' translations, yet constantly citing Chaves' own footnotes as his sources, Roa thus misleads the reader into thinking that the compiler has himself consulted the Itamaraty records (and translated the excerpts). Roa's page 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:<sup>8</sup>

¡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,<sup>9</sup> reads as follows:

El compilador desea aclarar que el lapsus y la mención no le corresponden, el informe confidencial de Correa 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 "señor" by Chaves, is retranslated by Roa into Portuguese, and appears in *Yo el Supremo* as "senhor," 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.<sup>10</sup>

When one consults the original text of the letter from Correia de Câmara to the foreign minister, the Marques of Aracaty, as published in the *Anais do Itamaraty* in 1938, 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 enxovalhada dos insultos, e conhecerão o Governo Paraguayo, e o seu Delegado, e bem a pezar seu até que ponto o Representante do imperio sabe sustentar a Dignidade do seu Eminente Character, e a Magestade offendida do 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,<sup>11</sup> but no more conclusive

<sup>8</sup> 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 records.

<sup>9</sup> The consular official in Itapúa, Norberto Ortellado, is also mentioned in the novel (286, 373).

<sup>10</sup> 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).

<sup>11</sup> It would appear that Roa was a fairly common surname in Paraguay in the nineteenth century. A Vicente Roa, secretary of the new consular government in 1841, is quoted in the Vázquez compilation of documents (364). In *Yo el Supremo* a mulatto named José Fortunato Roa is mentioned once (392).

evidence could be offered of our author's reliance on the work of the Paraguayan historian.<sup>12</sup>

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 tintes extraordinarios. Ninguno llamado como él por su vida novelesca, 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. Guerrero 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 musas, golpeando las puertas del Paraguay enclaustrado para 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."<sup>13</sup> The incident is not based directly on the death of Francia, which occurred of natural causes within the walls of his house, although Chaves does provide elements from which Roa elaborated his account. The first of these elements is a reference to the fact that even in the last month 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 despavoridos y el religioso se encontró completamente solo; en un extremo de la calle aparecía a caballo el Dictador, que retomaba de su paseo diario. El cura se arrodilló alzando 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 jesuita Lozano. Leí 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 sentidos debo escribir que esa tarde vi a Pedro Lozano en

<sup>12</sup> Two other highly significant passages in the ambassador's letter read: "Tenho entendido, Senhor Roas, disse eu ao Secretario; que apezar da vizinhança em que nos pôz a nossa respectiva posição Topographica, cada vez nos conhecemos menos huns aos outros..." (*Anais*, 4:61) and "Não está satisfeito o Governo Paraguayo com ter atado a Legação Brasileira ao pestifero solo de Itapúa de tantos Mezes a esta parte; não lhe basta a ter posto o Ministro Publico do imperio em huma miseravel Cinzalla, alojamento de Indios, e no alinhamento desses mesmos Indios; cercado de Lupanares, que o avizinhão de todos os lados; cobertos de terra, e de agua, que lhe envão innumeradas goteiras, devorado de insectos, e de sevandijas os mais asquerosos; tem ácazo por pouco o haver feito fuzilar a hum criminozo a quarenta e cinco passos das portas deste indigno alojamento? ? ? ...O Governo Dictatorial deve ter bem presente, que as Naçoens sõem punir severamente certos insultos..." (4:62).

<sup>13</sup> See my essay "Eater-Reception and De-Composition: Worms in *Yo el Supremo*."

el cura que me cortó el paso, calle de la Encarnación abajo, en el momento en que se desencadenaba la tormenta. Con las primeras gotas cayó lo obscuro de repente. El sargento de descubierta, los batidores, el cometero, el tambor, ya habían pasado. En un recodo apareció el cura de sobrepelliz y estola. Dos o tres monaguillos lo acompañaban portando velones encendidos que la lluvia y el viento no lograban apagar. La charanga de la escolta se desvaneció en el rumor de la campanilla que uno de los acólitos agitaba empavorecido ante mí como ante la aparición de un espectro. El moro siguió avanzando al tranco, las orejas vibradoras hacia el campanileo. Pensé en un nuevo complot tras ese simulacro del viático para un moribundo. (61)

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 omniscient 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 reiterated 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 acopiador 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."<sup>14</sup> (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 metahistorical novel), yet Roa's skepticism as to whether the subject of history is knowable results not in indifference but in ever greater urgency: "Escribir no significa convertir lo real en palabras sino hacer que la palabra sea real" (67).<sup>15</sup> Frederic Jameson's Lacanian formulation is apt:

[H]istory 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. (35)

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.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> For an extended commentary on Roa's use of the Musil quotation, see Krysinski, 422-23. Much the same skepticism about the adequacy of language was expressed in the 1969 story "Contar un cuento": "Para mí la realidad es lo que queda cuando ha desaparecido toda la realidad. ...Sólo podemos aludirla vagamente, o soñarla, o imaginarla." (*Moriencia* 90)

<sup>15</sup> Gerald Martin has commented: "Roa fully recognizes the 'ambiguity' of reality—his novel is almost Althusserian in its epistemological intentionality—but insists that the difficult of interpreting the nature-society dialectic of human history in no way justifies ambiguities in the relation between the writer and the people or between the writer and the reader. These are quite separate problems." (278-79)

<sup>16</sup> For a brilliant reading of the politics of Roa's novel, see Gerald Martin, 277-91.

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