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## WRITING THE STATE: *I THE SUPREME* BY AUGUSTO ROA BASTOS

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### Introduction: 'Is there a story?'

The story of Augusto Roa Bastos's *I the Supreme* (1975) is quite difficult to reconstruct.<sup>1</sup> This is because of the ways in which meaning is organized, represented and distributed throughout the novel. In structuralist terms, its "discourse" and compositional procedures seem to dominate its 'histoire' or (hi)story. In *I the Supreme*, a novel about the origins of a state, a nation and a "people", readers are confronted with what is evidently a *construction*, made out of a variety of discursive materials and perspectives, as if attempting, from the two-dimensionality of the page, to produce an effect of three-dimensionality – in the tradition of cubist painting – in which conventional reading becomes more like a stuttered "scanning". The work, however, is not merely a static puzzle. Even though the arrangement of the material functions to subvert the dominant discourse of El Supremo, the novel's dictator (the narrative function of another 'character', the Compiler), the tension between textual fragmentation and textual unity – the one and the many texts – is, arguably, a discursive inflection of the attempt by the dictator to impose his own will/text (the "Perpetual Circular") on others.<sup>2</sup> In what follows I will concentrate on the political and philosophical dimensions of this tension.<sup>3</sup>

"Detracing the path leading back through so many years, passing once again by way of low tricks and high treason, misfeasance and malfeasance...", the voice of El Supremo emerges from the dead, and installs itself in the centre of power, the "House of Government".<sup>4</sup> From here he watches, listens and orders society, engages with those voices that have made a "barbaric" myth of him (El Supremo re-writes history against the grain of regional liberal historiography), and traces the story of his eventual failure from the heights of the political.<sup>5</sup> The following passage, situated towards the end of the novel, before the "last dictator" – the *Tenebrion Obscurus* – devours what remains of the dictator's flesh, reveals and summarizes this narrative, condensing within it some of the work's most important themes, whilst also giving clues as to their significance:

"There was another time, I remind myself, when I wrote, dictated, copied. I flung myself heart and soul into paper-and-ink work. Suddenly a full stop [*punto*]. An abrupt end to this abandon. The point [*punto*] at which the absolute begins to take on the form of history from the other side. At one time toward the beginning, I believed that I dictated, read, and worked under the sway [*imperio*] of universal reason, under the rule of my own sovereignty, under the dictates of the Absolute. I now ask myself: Who is the amanuensis? Not the trust-unworthy scribe, certainly."  
(410-411)

This passage suggests that once upon a time ("another time... toward the beginning") El Supremo had a particular power, a sovereign power to decide; now, aware of his proximate demise, he realizes that he has lost it, that it may have been an illusion. A change has taken place that has put an end (a full stop [*punto*]) to what he refers to as the "absolute" giving birth to history 'from the other side', and now out of the dictator's control. The implicit answer to his last question ("Who is the amanuensis?") is that now he

is the secretary – the "trust-unworthy scribe"; that *he*, rather than his amanuensis, Patiño, is being dictated to by history, and is to be written by, or rather, in it.<sup>6</sup> The narrative thus traces a movement from a situation in which power is held – when El Supremo, as sovereign, dictates history – to another in which it is lost. Historical change has now escaped his grasp/rule and undermined it. *I the Supreme* is thus a tragedy of sorts, telling the story, however phantasmatic or fictional, of a "rise and fall", of a certain (sovereign) *illusion of the political*.

### **Sovereign Redistribution**

As he narrates his story, El Supremo recalls the moment when as a young man he was expelled from school: the "rector" complains of his reading "the books and the ideas of those libertine impostors... the anti-Christ". The young student answers, prefiguring his own modernizing political project after his country's independence from colonial rule: "You still want to destroy Newton with syllogisms... We, on the other hand, are endeavouring to make *everything new* with the help of masons such as Rousseau, Montesquieu, Diderot, Voltaire, and others as good as they are" (147). All are associated with the desacralising anti-Absolutist movement of the Enlightenment, widely read, although prohibited, in late eighteenth-century colonial Latin America, and influential in the formation of an independence-minded elite. And it is this kind of language, the language of the Enlightenment, that informs El Supremo's description of his story.

What does El Supremo mean when he tells us that he thought he "dictated, read, and worked under the sway of universal reason, under the rule of my own sovereignty, under the dictates of the Absolute"? The Enlightenment had two dialectically related moments: in its negative aspect, influenced by advances in the natural and human sciences, it criticized sacred explanations of the universe and of absolutist monarchy; and in its positive aspect, it argued for the universality of reason, the sovereignty of the individual subject, and various rationally organized state forms, be they liberal, as in the case of Locke, or republican as in the case of Rousseau.<sup>7</sup> What is involved politically is thus a re-distribution of "sovereignty", and the power it institutionalizes as legitimate, from one focussed on the authority of the sacred body of the absolutist monarch, to another "*new*" kind of body politic, now focussed on the "people" as citizens (Rousseau) or as self-interested "possessive" individuals (Locke). Each, however, *as state form* unified as *nations*.<sup>8</sup> Since, for the Enlightenment, reason was by definition universal, in the sense that everyone has it and that it is the same for everyone, it also became possible to think of planning a collective history of sorts, and, to be sure, rationally organising the state. This, El Supremo says, was his intention: "Removing from the chaos of the improbable the constellation possessed of probity. A State revolving on the axis of its sovereignty. The sovereign power of the people, nucleus of energy for the organization of the Republic" (97). The philosophical context of his discourse, therefore, is provided by emerging theories of the modern state associated with the Enlightenment; its political context being its conjunctural actualisation in the French Revolution and the Latin American struggles for independence and the creation of sovereign republics. In other words, the context and contents of El Supremo's discourse is provided by the formation of modern bourgeois nation-states both in theory and in practice: "primitive political accumulation", in Althusser's words, with all of the violence such a process involves.<sup>9</sup>

That El Supremo should mention Rousseau first amongst the above list of the

“illuminated” should come as no surprise. His influence throughout Latin America was extensive, and although it is not certain whether Dr. Francia himself read Rousseau, El Supremo, Roa Bastos’s fictional version, clearly has.<sup>10</sup> Indeed he glosses Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*, almost exactly:

"The multitude-people; in other words, the labouring-procreating populace produced all the goods and suffered all the ills. The rich reaped all the goods. Two apparently inseparable estates. Equally fatal to the common good: from the one came those responsible for tyranny; from the other, the tyrants... it's precisely because the force of circumstances tends increasingly to destroy equality that the force of Revolution must always tend to maintain it. No one should be rich enough to buy another, and no one poor enough to find himself obliged to sell himself... I want to bring the extremes together... There is no equality without freedom... Those are the two ends that we must conjoin" (38).<sup>11</sup>

Like Rousseau, El Supremo puts the general interest of the community above the private interests of individuals. In this sense, his project is decidedly anti-Liberal. In the historical context El Supremo is addressing this means it is aimed at the Buenos Aires elites (*Porteñistas*), from whose mercantile interests he defends the emerging nation.<sup>12</sup> "(T)he force of circumstance" undermining equality (fundamental to the freedom desired by Rousseau and El Supremo) is constituted by the egoism ("*amour-propre*") or possessive individualism structuring civil society, and considered by classical liberal political theorists such as John Locke as the "natural rights" of "man" and the foundation of modern societies. In the latter's view, the state's function is merely to guarantee these rights, that is, private property and its corresponding notions of individual freedom (see Locke 327-344 and Macpherson). Rousseau, on the contrary, argued that private property was not a natural fact or right, but a social and historical phenomenon. For this reason, in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, the idea of a mythical "state of nature", in which there is no private property, has a *historical* and critical dimension that reveals that the egoistic pursuit of private interests in civil society is far from natural and which, furthermore, damages the freedom of the community.<sup>13</sup> Hence the classical republican demand in Rousseau's work, taken up by the Jacobins in the French Revolution, not to mention El Supremo above, for an economy based on small peasant farms in which no one is so poor as to have to sell their labor (power) to another.

The political corollary of equality is a conception of freedom based on direct popular (peasant) democracy in which sovereignty lies with the people, the "general will". The "social contract" consists precisely in the recognition and imposition of this will over and above the Hobbesian chaos of the "will of all", that is, of contending private interests (and, of course, of Hobbes's absolutist solution to it). These, for Rousseau, can only be realized *morally*, in and through the "general will", which is *one* and indivisible (rather than, for example, through the abolition of private property). According to Étienne Balibar, Rousseau's new notion of popular sovereignty is mediated by the idea of "community", whilst Locke's is mediated by "property".<sup>14</sup> The key question addressed by both Rousseau and El Supremo is thus: how to make virtuous *citizens* of private individuals such that they can exercise their sovereignty? The answer, given its economic connotations and its character as an originary event (that is, the 'social contract' as a self-constituting moral community) is revolutionary. This is where Rousseau and El Supremo begin to part company. For if the latter considers himself to be the mythic founder and

defender of a nation, a heroic deed in the republican tradition, his appropriation of the people's sovereignty – "I-am-the-State", El Supremo insists, re-absolutizing sovereign power – condemns him (*el punto*) to failure and betrayal (166).

The above quotation from Rousseau's *The Social Contract* in *I the Supreme* should not be read, therefore, as just another example of erudite intertextuality on Roa Bastos's part or as *just* a formal (meta-)compositional gesture, constitutive of the discourse of the novel. The point is rather to see how the dilemmas of Rousseau's work are inscribed, dramatized, and reflected in Roa Bastos's own.

### **The Lawgiver**

*The Social Contract* provides the occasion for such a situation, relevant both to the context of post-Independence struggles to secure Paraguayan national sovereignty, as told in *I the Supreme*, as well as to the interpretation of the text itself. It does so in a character Rousseau calls the "Lawgiver", whose function is described as follows:

"Laws are really nothing other than the conditions on which civil society exists. A people, since it is subject to laws, ought to be the author of them. The right of laying down the rules of society belongs only to those who form the society; but how can they exercise it?... Who is to give it the foresight necessary to formulate enactments and proclaim them...? How can a blind multitude, which often does not know what it wants, because it seldom knows what is good for it, undertake by itself an enterprise as vast and difficult as a system of legislation? By themselves the people always will what is good, but by themselves they do not always discern it... It must be made to see things as they are, and sometimes as they should be seen; it must be shown the good path... Such public enlightenment would produce a union of understanding and will in the social body, bring the parts into perfect harmony and lift the whole to its fullest strength. Hence the necessity of a lawgiver."<sup>15</sup>

In *The Social Contract* Rousseau's character, the Lawgiver, occupies the site of a series of tensions which Althusser calls "discrepancies" (*décalages*).<sup>16</sup> For if the "people" are both the author of the "general will", which formalizes their sovereignty, and subjected to it, Rousseau also makes it clear that the "people" as such must be *formed* by 'public enlightenment' for this to be the case. In other words, the "people" both produce and are the product of the "social contract" (as Althusser suggests, Rousseau presupposes what he is supposed to be explaining). The "people", on the one hand, institute the "general will" and, as sovereign, employ the Lawgiver to draft its law, but, on the other, are made or educated by them in order to do so: the Lawgiver must be ready to "change human nature, to transform each individual... into a part of a much greater whole".<sup>17</sup> The Legislator is thus part of the Absolutist tradition, but turns against it. However, the character is also a fiction, invented to overcome the *aporia* in Rousseau's attempt to historicize the mythical and revolutionary origin of the 'people' as sovereign subject. This, as we shall see below, is the site occupied by Roa Bastos's El Supremo. It also constitutes his drama: on the one hand, he writes in his "Private Notebook", "the people have made me their supreme potestate. Identified with it, what fear can we feel?" whilst, on the other, the function of his "Perpetual Circular" is to ensure the formation of a "people" with common knowledge of and investment in the nation's past and struggles for independence and freedom (166).<sup>18</sup> The Supreme Dictator is thus "in the service of the power that dominates" (40): impossibly

identified with those he is attempting to construct a civic and national identity for. In this sense, the place occupied by the Lawgiver and El Supremo is not, cannot be, one of identity, but of *difference*. Paradoxically, however, it is from this very *difference* that the fiction of *identity*, the "people" and their nation, emerges (as a state production)

If we return to the above passage glossed from *The Social Contract* in *I the Supreme*, and compare it to Rousseau's original, it is now possible to appreciate an important variation relevant to the story narrated in the novel. Rather than the *law* (of the "people") acting to secure equality and freedom, as in Rousseau's text, El Supremo suggests that the Revolution, or more precisely, *he* ("I") would serve that function. This is the aporia of the Lawgiver at work: El Supremo usurps the "rule of law" as authored by the "people". In other words, he re-appropriates the "new" moment of *citizenship* back from the new political *subject*, only to return it to them as his invention and gift: he is the law (-giver) and they (the 'people') are now *subjected* to it.<sup>19</sup> Roa Bastos's resolution in *I the Supreme* of Rousseau's theoretical problem is twofold. First, a practical and Machiavellian one: he unites in one person what in Rousseau's work are kept as separate functions, the Lawgiver and the Prince; combining Rousseauian theory with Machiavellian practice. Together they form "the gigantic tree" of the absolute: re-distributed sovereignty re-appropriated.<sup>20</sup>

Roa Bastos's gloss of Rousseau's text, therefore, (a) provides the novel with a political model in which to inscribe the story of El Supremo (as Lawgiver and Prince), locating his drama within the context and dilemma constituted by the formation of a "people"; (b), it furnishes the story with a particular set of political contents that foreground the republican tradition of subordinating the "will of all" to the "general will", that is, the economic (private property) to the political (citizenship), which in turn, (c), makes it relevant to the arguments concerning the origins of the modern state in general and more particularly to the development of bourgeois nation-states in Latin America.<sup>21</sup> This, (d), clarifies the particular form in which El Supremo, as Lawgiver, believed he embodied the enlightenment ideals of sovereign redistribution, universal reason and the Absolute – here, Rousseau's "people", whose subjectivity as citizens he, nevertheless, betrays, re-appropriating the power of sovereign decision (law-making) that should lie with them. In this sense, (e), it is now possible to locate El Supremo's discourse-dictation: his words are, so to speak, the letter of the *law*, and the "Perpetual Circular", his legacy.

### **To Read, To Write, To Represent**

But how did he embody these ideals? If we return to Rousseau's text describing the Lawgiver, the answer to this question becomes evident. It is because he had the power of interpretation. This is Roa Bastos's second resolution of Rousseau's aporia: he can *see* what the people cannot: "the good". The "people", on the other hand, are blind. The history of this competence, "the foresight necessary" in Rousseau's words, is traced in *I the Supreme*. Indeed, it describes his rise to power: before he can dictate he must be able to read and interpret signs, to *see* the "good" others cannot.

As a child, the dictator reads nature for its secrets:

"Rejected by human beings and even by animals, I gave myself over to books. Not to books of paper, to books of stones, plants. Above all, the famous stones of the Guayrá. Very crystalline stones" (280).

With these stones, El Supremo had wanted to make the alchemic "stone of stones: The Stone" in his laboratory (280). He was not successful. We find out later in the novel, however, that he did manage to invent something "much better":

"I discovered the line of perfect rectitude passing through all possible refractions. I fabricated a prism that could break a thought down into the seven colors of the spectrum. Then each one of them into seven others, until I caused a light to come forth that is white and black at the same time, there where those capable of conceiving only the double-opposite in all things see nothing more than a confused jumble of colours" (410).

This "semiotic prism", perhaps a parody of Greimas's "semiotic rectangle", is an instrument of decipherment and abstraction enhancing the gaze and interpretative faculties of the dictator, enabling him to read and *impose order* on thoughts, and to discover the basic semes (the minimum units of signification: black/white, etc.) constituting the deep binary structures that make meaning possible.<sup>22</sup> It is this reading-ability that, in giving El Supremo the power to *see* (and Roa Bastos the occasion to parody structuralism), makes his rise to power possible. Here, as reader of the sky – and it is from the sky that his power comes (as does writing), in the shape of a captured meteor – he tells his civil and military functionaries – and us, his readers – in the "Perpetual Circular" that:

"I understood then that it is only by ripping this sort of thread of chance out of the weft of events that the impossible can be made possible. I suddenly realized that to-be-able-to-do is to-be-able-to-enable. At that instant a shooting star traced a luminous streak across the firmament... I had read somewhere that falling stars, meteors, aeroliths, are the very picture of chance in the universe. The force of power lies then, I thought, in chasing down chance: *re-trapping* it. Discovering its laws; that is to say, the laws of oblivion. Chance exists only because oblivion exists. Subject it to the law of counter-oblivion. Trace counter-chance" (95-96 – translation modified)

Everything must be readable, that is, foreseeable, so that out of "chance", and against it, necessity ("law") may emerge. There are inscriptions everywhere to be decoded. El Supremo must find and take hold of the "thread... of the weft of events" (or "plot" – *trama* in the Spanish original), and decipher the stories that surround him. Hence the importance of certain technologies of vision such as El Supremo's telescope (*lente-de-ver-lejos*) with which, once in power, he spies on the nation and reads the "book of Constellations", where he must continually keep an eye out for "chance". Indeed, the end of his power (the "fall") comes from the sky (upon high), when El Supremo is sucked into the mud (below), in the form of a flock of *blind* birds that fall at his feet. He is then "lost in two" ("I/HE") and overtaken by history, to become its object, or in historiography, its third-person: subject of enunciation and subject of the enunciated (54, 420).

The importance of a specific competence, combined with instrumental reason, is underlined: "to-be-able-to-do is to-be-able-to-enable", or "*poder hacer es hacer poder*" in the Spanish, in which "to-be-able" [*poder*] also means power; thus, the "power-to-do is to makes power". Knowledge is thus intimately associated with power. In true Machiavellian fashion, "chance" ("fortune" in Machiavelli's sense), as represented by the meteor, must be

captured in El Supremo's technologically enhanced gaze and controlled. Being able to read its traces in the sky, and decipher its message, is thus fundamental to the dictator's power on earth. He will capture chance (the meteor) and chain it to his desk. Doing so will ensure his position, from where he can counter chance's "writing" with his own (dictation). Thus El Supremo must not only be able to read, but also to write, so as to combat "chance", because interpretation is not enough if not re-encoded in writing: in other words, the dictator's writ must be "traced", that is, dictated. This is important to the dictator because chance has a subjective dimension too: forgetfulness, or "*olvido*", translated above as "oblivion". As Lawgiver, the dictator will have to dictate (his own) history, "trace counter-chance", so that it will not be forgotten, and thereby produce new "enlightened" subjects, citizens aware of their past and the struggle for national independence: the virtuous cultural prerequisites of a sovereign and popular nation-state. A sense of "will" that is socially "general". In Étienne de la Boétie's terms: freedom remembered, imposed and learned overcomes servitude. As it appears in the "Perpetual Circular" this history makes up a substantial part of the novel; it is what the reader consumes too as El Supremo dictates it to his secretary Patiño. However, it is too late, for the dictator is dead, his people still "blind" (the birds) and his "Perpetual Circular" the never-ending dictation, or "ramblings" in Alberto Moreiras's terms, of a dead man.<sup>23</sup>

The historical context of this acquisition of interpretative power is that of a society emerging from a colonial province into the "chaos" of post-colonialism. El Supremo tells his readers how he participated in these developments, but also how he distanced himself from them. He retires from the government twice, dissatisfied with the manoeuvrings of the creole military elite, and from his farm *watches* the post-colonial drama. To read and interpret "correctly" needs the perspective (here El Supremo's perspective and distance reminds us of the author's own exile) from which the eye can read the signs from a privileged location, as if looking through a telescope (*lente-de-ver-lejos*). Paradoxically, it is this distance that enables him to *see* and interpret (read) the "general will" of the people, and bring him *close* to what he was "looking for", the people and power:

"Awake, I *saw* this dream vision: My rat nursery had turned into a caravan of men. I was walking at the head of this teaming multitude. We reached a column of black stone, in which a man was buried up to his armpits... Stuck fast there he appeared to be crying out to be dispetrified. The caravan behind strained and squeaked... I crossed the Plaza de Armas, followed by a growing crowd acclaiming my name. When I came back, I was another man. I had learned a great deal at my farm-lookout in Ybyray. The retreat had brought me closer to what I was seeking. From that point on I would yield to nothing and to no one opposed to the holy cause of the Fatherland... total autonomy, absolute sovereignty of my decisions. Training, under my command, of the forces necessary to see that they were obeyed... From the people-multitude I picked the men who formed the skeleton organization of the army of the people. An even more invincible support than that of cannons and rifles in the defence of the Republic and the Revolution" (163-165).

I have already noted the ideological importance of Rousseau's text in providing *I the Supreme* with some of its political and historical content. *The Social Contract* also provides the novel with a complex hero relevant to this politics, the Lawgiver, which defines the relationship of the dictator with the "people". Here we would now seem to be in the presence of the dictator's fantastic narrative dramatization of his rise to power. It is the



consummation of the 'social contract' itself as a revolutionary act: rats become "men" (the natural human species becomes explicitly social in constituting itself as a specific community through the "social pact" establishing the "general will"), and a 'new' once petrified subject makes its appearance on the stage of political history: the "people" as sovereign.<sup>24</sup> With this pact a new order is established: a Republic. Here, however, with the dictator (Lawgiver + Prince) at its head as the privileged interpreter-subject of the "general will", representing and indeed appropriating sovereign power. It is HE ('ÉL') who comes to power out of the flux of events: the Supreme Subject. What is to be done? "[E]rect hierarchy in the midst of anarchy" – that is, construct a new sovereign independent and popular state (96). It is El Supremo's ability to read and interpret signs that gives him the power to *represent* (the "people").<sup>25</sup>

### The Supreme Dictator

Returning to our passage summarising the story of the novel, I would like to make two points here. First, at the level of "content", we have arrived at its beginning, when, the dictator reminisces he labored, read and dictated under the signs of universal reason, the absolute and his own sovereignty, free from tutelage. In other words, we have arrived at the stage in his history in which, in Carl Schmitt's terms, he *decides*, or, in the novel's, when he *dictates*.<sup>26</sup> The dictator, of course, will still need to read, but weight will now be shifted from the interpretation of signs to their ordering and dictation – to the production of discourse. He will be the privileged "supreme" practitioner: rather than just "interpreting the world", he will "change it" in the name of the "people-multitude". We are not to witness the "withering away of the state", however, as prefigured in the political philosophy of Rousseau, according to Lucio Colletti, but its post-colonial (national) re-construction.<sup>27</sup>

Second, a related but more formal point: a minimal story is usually considered to be constituted by three events: the first and last by moments of stasis and order; the second tracing a process of change, disrupting the harmony of the first order and marking a path of temporal movement and transformation towards the third. At the general level of the narrative, as summarized in the passage above, we find that in *I the Supreme* we are rather confronted by an inversion of this model: *movement* towards *order* which, we have been warned, is undermined by *movement*. Out of the flux, as the dictator sees it, of post-colonial Paraguay we are told about El Supremo's order which, in the end, as suggested by "the full stop", is overtaken by the implication of further change (the history and historiography of which the dictator has now become the object).

In the light of our argument so far, what does the dictator do? "I the Supreme Dictator of the Republic *Order*..." are the opening words of the novel, as they are of the "pasquinade" parodying the dictator's script and sentencing him and his functionaries to death or oblivion, informing readers right from its beginning about the dictator's role: it is both regulative and imperative (7). There are three interrelated ways in which El Supremo orders and dictates: politically, he is a republican *Prince*; pedagogically or culturally, he occupies the centre of the nation's symbolic order - he is the *Lawgiver*: "I am that PERSONAGE (*personaje*) and that NAME. Supreme incarnation of the race... I am the SUPREME PERSONAGE who watches over and protects your sleeping dream" (320); and semiotically, he is a writer of a story in which he is the main character (*personaje*). In what follows, I shall briefly conclude my observations focussing on the political and the pedagogical modes of dictatorship, leaving the dictatorial practice of writing for another

As dictator, El Supremo is positioned in the heights of post-enlightenment politics (or as Jean-Luc Nancy might say, its sovereign "summit"). Armed with his "telescope" in the House of Government, from where he surveys his realm, he reads the needs of the "people-multitude" and defends the nation from foreign interests in their name – because, as we have seen, in El Supremo's (and Rousseau's) view they are not equipped to represent themselves. In telling his story in the "Perpetual Circular", the dictator also narrates the constitution of a sovereign "people". But, in representing them as Lawgiver, he effectively takes their place. His presence, as dictator, entails their absence, like in linguistic representation: he is, in other words, their political *sign*. The people are moreover, at least in his story, complicit in the production of this sign, in the re-emergence of the "noxious weed" of absolutism: having elected El Supremo perpetual dictator, the "people" have given up (that is, forgotten) that sovereignty which, in republican thought, lies solely with them (267). In Étienne de la Boétie's terms, *I the Supreme* is thus also a drama of "voluntary servitude", of what Roa Bastos will subsequently call "the monotheism of power"<sup>29</sup>: sovereignty reconceived as a broader – that is, cultural (or religious and theological) – state fetishism.

Inside Paraguay, however, El Supremo uses his position to undermine the economic and cultural power of the military-landowner-merchant alliance. He puts his and the peoples' enemies in prison, or even has them shot against the "orange tree". Under El Supremo's rule, the upper class suffer... and produce pamphlets and "pasquinades" (the primary sources for much of the Paraguayan historiography of the period of Dr. Francia's rule, its archive). The dictator, for his part, responds with his own "writing", putting a "full-stop" to their "plots" so as to get on dictating his own: "Sudden full stop. Death blow to their logorrhea (*parrafada*). The avalanche of words meeting with a sudden quiet, the wordmongers with a sudden quietus. Not the full stop of a dot of black ink; the tiny black hole produced by a rifle cartridge in the breast of the enemies of the Fatherland is what counts. It admits of no reply. It rings out. The end. Finis" (61-62). It is this same "dot" (*punto*), of course, that eventually puts a "full-stop" (*punto*) to El Supremo's own dictation.

The absence in the novel of any kind of heroic or transcendental embodiment of the "people" is striking. In *I the Supreme* Roa Bastos has not subordinated his literary work to any easily identifiable political logic, "popular" or not, but instead dramatized the contradictions of a revolutionary dictatorship by working one side of the Rousseauian political structure occupied by the dictator (revolution) against the other (constitution) as Lawgiver. In sharp contrast to Roa Bastos's first novel *Hijo de Hombre* ("Son of Man"), published in 1960, there are no Cristobal Jara's or Macario's in *I the Supreme*, models of political action and narration respectively. Instead, the appearance of popular characters has a transgressive or carnivalesque, rather than "exemplary", role. One such character is the unnamed "peasant". With the invasion of colonial Paraguay by Argentine forces led by Manuel Belgrano, the "Governor" decides to flee: "In order to keep from being recognized, he hunted up a peasant and gave the man his brigadier's uniform in exchange for his rags. He also made him a present of his eyeglasses and his gold cigar holder. Then he hid himself... He left the Paraguayans to get along as best they could all by themselves". The creole leaders of the Paraguayan forces watch in awe as the "Governor" risks himself in battle, "disappearing at times and reappearing at others as though to lend the troops courage... They were amazed at the cleverness, the bold, completely unprecedented

courage of the governor, who had left his mount behind and hidden himself so well in the guise of this bearded, dark-skinned man with callused hands and bare feet" (106). The military chiefs manage, at last, to get the "Governor" back behind the lines where he could be more easily consulted: "The mute presence answered them with motions of his head, showing them all the ins and outs of how to trounce the enemy". Then a peasant appears, and the real "Governor" is unmasked. The military leaders then turn to the man (un)dressed as the Governor: "And where did you come from? they ask the completely naked peasant, half dead with fear. I... the poor man murmurs covering his privates with his hands. I came... I just came to have myself a peek at all this pantomonium!" (106).

There are two points to be made with regard to this humorous episode: first, in momentarily donning the clothes of the representative of the Spanish Crown, the peasant, in carnivalesque fashion, turns the world up-side-down, signifying thus the emergence of a new sovereign subject. However, he does so, and this is the second point, inadvertently. Although he helps secure the victory of the Paraguayan forces, the event that inaugurates national independence is merely a "pantomonium", a harmless spectacle in which he may participate, but which is of no real concern. For the "peasant", the battle is anything but a transcendental event. His political presence is, as the text (the "Perpetual Circular") suggests, *silent*.

The structure of this episode thus repeats that of *The Social Contract*. Although "naturally" predisposed to sovereignty – he is the "good" – the peasant is nevertheless "blind" to its meaning. In other words, he is only "unconsciously" free. El Supremo will, nevertheless, represent him, be his sign, and speak for him. He will dictate for him and in his name, so as to defend popular interest from the creole economic and military elites. In this sense, following the Rousseauian political tradition, El Supremo occupies that extremely problematic *jacobin* space of the political avant-garde, dictating for those who supposedly cannot (for whatever reason) represent or govern for themselves. And this is what perhaps makes *I the Supreme* unique, for at one and the same time it dramatizes in literary form the origins of a state as well as the contradictions of political representation in the context of revolution.

If we now return to the passage glossed by El Supremo from Rousseau's *The Social Contract* with which we began, it becomes clear that the text not only quotes Rousseau but *rewrites* him too, underlining the tension between *revolution* and *constitution* that characterizes his work, *in the light of Marx*; that is, according to Balibar's account of political modernity, in the retrospective light of the historical emergence of "the people's people", the working class.<sup>30</sup> This is the significance of what Roa Bastos has El Supremo refer to in his version of Rousseau's text as "the labouring-procreating populace". Such a transformation of Rousseau's text has both political and historical significance. It pulls El Supremo's discourse (dictation) into the present of his writing and literary construction by Roa Bastos, such that the story of the novel might resonate with the revolutionary enthusiasm emerging in the Argentina of the late 1960s and early 1970s when *I the Supreme* was composed. In this sense, the novel projects its postcolonial drama of revolution-and-constitution into its fictional future, most notably, for example, in the figure of the "montonera" guerrilla-woman María de los Ángeles who, in the novel, returns from exile to set revolutionary time going again. This same gesture works in the opposite direction too, as historical anachronism: Roa Bastos's "addition" to Rousseau tells us that the novel simultaneously projects its author's present back into the fictional past of its

dictator, El Supremo. It appears there in the form of the Compiler.

El Supremo is also a dictator in the *pedagogic* sense, for he "dictates" (*dicta*) classes, a common expression in the Spanish language. For example, he "dictates" a "writing lesson" to his amanuensis Patiño, who is unable to adequately transcribe the real meaning of the dictator's voice (his dictation) representing the unrecorded voice of the people not included in the historical archive. He also, as we have seen, dictates a "history lesson": insofar as it narrates the story of the Revolution, the "Perpetual Circular" is designed to produce new citizen-subjects imbued with a sense of national identity and political purpose. When bringing his (s)tory to an end, he underlines its importance for the future of the nation: "Reflect at length on these points that constitute the foundation of our Republic. Focal points of its progress into the future. I want chiefs, delegates, administrators who are skilled in their various functions. I want to find integrity, austerity, valor, honesty in each of you". They are to follow his own virtuous example. He then informs them that there is to be a Congress in September so that "the Supreme Government may be strengthened and made uniform" (369). It is too late, however, for the dictator dies. It is at this point that El Supremo's dead dog Sultán, "shaking off the dirt" from his skull, also returns from the dead, to accuse him of the death of his servant "Pilar the black" – an ex-slave whose freedom was bought by the dictator – and of betraying the "people" (374). Sultán forces El Supremo to write about Pilar and the dictator agrees, for, he says, "letters couldn't care less whether what is written with them is true or false" (378). This is the point at which El Supremo becomes history's "amenuensis", and is now dictated to.

Pilar was also the beneficiary of El Supremo's instruction: he receives a "reading lesson". The dictator teaches his servant to read the skies (from where, as we have seen, his own power comes) with his "telescope" (an instrument of that power). The sky, in El Supremo's view, is also a mirror of souls. Pilar's reading lesson is, therefore, a lesson in "almastronomy" too: "A meaning is hidden in each thing. A sign in each man", says the dictator. "What is yours, Sire?", asks Pilar. "Capricorn", he answers. After the lesson, El Supremo muses that "The black won't get past Capricorn... His false inventiveness keeps him stuck fast (*clavado*) in treacherous irreverence" (379). And the dictator is right, although it is he that is at first "stuck fast" or "stopped... dead" (the two translations of *clavado* in the English-language version of the novel):

"One afternoon, on returning from my outing, astonishment stopped me dead in my tracks at the office door. Wearing my dress uniform, the black was sitting at my desk dictating, in strident tones, the most outlandish decrees to an invisible scribe... The worst of it is that in the hallucination of my anger I see in that emaciated black a perfect portrait of myself! He is faultlessly imitating my own voice, my appearance... He gets to his feet... Takes out the thick file containing the trail records of the Conspiracy of the year '20... screaming insults at each of the sixty-eight traitors put to death... He leaps upon me... Dances round me... forcing me to play a role in the farce being staged by this monkey disguised as the Supreme Dictator of a Nation. One after the other, in a dizzying whirl, he transforms himself into each of the sixty-eight traitors put to death. It is they who insult me now, curse me, judge me... Sixty-eight voices from beyond the grave, commingled in a single shriek from the black. Guards!" (382-383)

Pilar's carnivalesque mimicry of El Supremo reveals that it was not necessary for him to be able to read beyond "Capricorn", the dictator's sign. Indeed, in this case, El Supremo's reading lesson seems to have worked all too well, for Pilar was able to interpret his "significance", perform it, and put it on show. In having at one and the same time occupied, parodied and judged the Lawgiver, however, Pilar is, unlike the *silent* "peasant", executed for his interpretative pains. El Supremo thus re-imposes his own power to judge. This "point" (or "full stop") in El Supremo's dictation-dictatorship, however, also marks its end.

It is a beast's voice, Sultan's, and not that of a peasant, that finally condemns El Supremo in the novel. In the dog's view "Pilar the black was the only free being" to live at the dictator's side: "He found everything good in what you call everything evil; from the line round his middle downward. Do you consider that the waterline of what you keep pompously referring to as the arguments of Universal Reason?" (386). As we saw above, it was from "the sway [*imperio*] of universal reason", its new "empire", that El Supremo thought he dictated. But then, he says, "suddenly a full stop". The "full stop" here, of course, is the one that puts an end to Pilar's parodic discourse, to his own "logorrhea". It is also the one that marks the limits of Enlightenment rationality as El Supremo's radical political project runs aground on the very constituency it supposedly represents (the fate, need it be said, of cultural enlightenment throughout Latin America and elsewhere). In the end, says Sultán to the dictator:

"You kept at a distance the people from whom you received power and sovereignty: well fed, protected, taught fear and veneration, because in your heart of hearts you too feared the people but did not venerate it. You turned yourself into a Great Obscurity for the people-mob [*gente-muchedumbre*]; into the great Don-Amo, the Lord-and-Master who demands docility in return for a full belly and an empty head" (423).

This accusation is not only a critique of El Supremo's version of the Rousseauian political project – "You stopped halfway and did not form true revolutionary leaders..." – but also a suggestion that in his very betrayal of the 'people' he was instrumental in creating the chimeric myth that outlived him (that, even, the very notion of the 'people' itself may be such a constitutional fantasy). Sultán even attacks the very competence that enables El Supremo to dictate, his interpretative power; that is, his ability to *read*: "You misread the will of the People [*voluntad del Común*]" says the dog, "and as a consequence you misused your power [*obraste mal*]". In the end, as El Supremo's micro-narrative of his political career makes clear, it is he that is to be written by history and not the other way round. Sultán condemns him to having to return from the dead, to account [*contar*] for his actions and respond to history (historiography): 'Oblivion [*olvido*] will devour the others. You, ex Supreme, are the one who must render an account of everything and pay up to the last quarter...' (423). It is in compliance with this condemnation that the novel – and El Supremo's discourse – begins, repeatedly, each and every time it is opened and read.

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## NOTES

1. For example, Alberto Moreiras writes: "There is no story line in *Yo el Supremo*. Its many pages give us the ramblings of a fellow who is either dead or dying" (74). The quotation I have used as my subtitle is the opening line of Ricardo Piglia's novel *Artificial Respiration (Respiración artificial)* in which the tension between "historia" as story and "historia" as history is dramatized - a tension performed in *I the Supreme* too. Formally and compositionally, *I the Supreme* is a precursor of *Artificial Respiration*.
2. The Compiler, however, also feeds the text with a cinematic desire for four-dimensionality: movement back and forth in time. From this perspective, its compositional principle is that of *montage*.
3. The story of the novel as told by the Supreme Dictator in his "Perpetual Circular" is the story of the independence of a nation and its transformation into a republic. It doubles, however, as the biography of the dictator - that is, of dictation and dictatorship - himself. Roa Bastos has used Julio Chavez's biography of El Supremo as both his narrative model, which he more or less parodies and reproduces, and as his historiographical resource. In this sense, *I the Supreme* is both a criticism of history as well as of its writing up as historiography.
4. Augusto Roa Bastos, *I the Supreme*, trans. Helen Lane (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 321 (all subsequent references to the novel will be included in the text in parenthesis). As brilliantly noted by Alain Sicard, this is why in the novel "la Révolution 'involue' á la recherche d'elle-meme. C'est cette 'involution' qui... engendre l'espace Romanesque" (788).
5. "The House of Government was turned into a receptacle that received the vibrations of all of Paraguay..." (44). For an account of Argentine revisionist historiography, see Tulio Halperin Donghi, *El revisionismo histórico argentino como visión decadentista de la historia nacional* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2002). Jean-Luc Nancy has recently insisted on how tropes associated with "height" feed the idea of sovereignty as the "summit" of the political. See his "Ex nihilo summum (Acerca de la soberanía)", in *La creación del mundo o la mundialización* (Barcelona: Paidós, 2003), 121.
6. In both senses: he becomes an object of History and of historiography. It is to challenge the later that he has "returned" - this, in a sense, is the founding fictional moment of *I the Supreme*: the return (as *revenant*) of the dictator of Paraguay between 1811 and 1840 and "hero" of its independence, Dr José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia. Like all *revenants* he too seeks justice.
7. In "What is Enlightenment?" Kant writes: "Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another... *Sapere aude!* 'Have courage to use your own reason!' - that is the motto of enlightenment." See Immanuel Kant, *On History*, edited by L. W. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1981), 3.
8. For the transfer of sovereignty to the "people" as a body politic, see Eric Santner, *The*

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*Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

9. Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, trans. by Greg Elliot (London and New York: Verso, 1999), 125.

10. In "Autocracia o Democracia" Roa Bastos insists that "Dr. Francia... did not read Rousseau, as I had his imaginary double do, the character from the novel" (my translation). He refers the reader, however, to Irala Burgo's *La ideología del Dr. Francia*, which suggests, through a reading of a *Note* of July 20, 1811 sent to the "President and members of the Ruling Junta of Buenos Aires", and signed, amongst others, by Dr. Francia, that in fact he may have read Rousseau's text, or at least known its arguments quite well.

11. Here is Rousseau's original: "If we enquire wherein lies precisely the greatest good of all... we shall find that it comes down to two main objects, *freedom* and equality... equality because freedom cannot survive without it... this word must not be taken to imply that degrees of power and wealth should be absolutely the same for all, but rather that no citizen shall be rich enough to buy another and none so poor as to be forced to sell himself... Do you want coherence in the state? Then bring the two extremes as close together as possible; have neither rich men nor beggars... from the one class comes friends of tyrants, from the other, tyrants... Such equality, we shall be told, is a chimera of theory and could not exist in reality... Precisely because the force of circumstances tends always to destroy equality, the force of legislation ought always tend to preserve it". See his *The Social Contract* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), 96-97.

12. This is what also makes of El Supremo a kind of nationalist and revisionist hero. Apart from glossing Rousseau, he also ridicules Bartolomé Mitre – who will later become the President of Argentina as well as a key architect of the War of the Triple Alliance (1865-1870) against Paraguay and an important liberal historian.

13. In "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality", Rousseau writes: "The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying 'This is mine', and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society". In *The Social Contract and Discourses* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1973), 76. Of course, Hegel and Marx refer to the latter as 'bourgeois society'.

14. Étienne Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy before and after Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994). vii-59.

15. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 83.

16. The theoretical problem in Rousseau's text is the "social contract" itself *qua* contract; the discrepancies are its theoretical effects which serve, each in its own way, to disavow the original problem: the idea of a social contract presupposes its subjects. According to Althusser, Rousseau later flees from the "failure" of political philosophy to the "triumphs" of "fiction" in his later novels such as *Emile, or On Education* and *Julie, or the New Heloise* (160) – much as Roa Bastos has done in *I the Supreme*, but *via* Rousseau's own fictional supplement in *The Social Contract* itself, which he generalizes as a problem for revolutionary politics as a whole (but which Althusser, interestingly, does not mention in his own critical analysis). See his "Rousseau: The Social Contract (The Discrepancies)," in *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Marx* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), 113-160.

17. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 84.

18. The Renaissance writer Étienne de la Boetie is also mentioned in *I the Supreme* (71).



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In his view, people live in 'voluntary servitude' because they have forgotten that they were once free – hence, perhaps, the importance of memory in the novel.

19. Étienne Balibar shows how the modern concept of the "subject", as both the active subject of an action, *and* as that which is dominated, emerges at the same time as the post-enlightenment re-distribution of sovereignty discussed here. See his *Citoyen Sujet et autres essais d'anthropologie philosophique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011), 1-84.

20. In Rousseau's words, "The lawgiver is the engineer who invents the machine; the prince is merely the mechanic who sets it up and operates it' (*The Social Contract*, 84). The novel's parodic evocation of Machiavelli's *The Prince* rightly occurs in one of the many moments El Supremo is underlining the importance of "the birth of the Nation, the formation of the Republic". He says: "Only I know how many times it was necessary to add a bit of fox fur when the lion's skin rampant on the shield of the Republic wasn't enough to cover its ass" (24). In Machiavelli's political manual for Princes, he suggests that they must learn from the beasts: 'he must learn from the fox and the lion' – the former because of its cunning, and the latter because of its power (99).

21. For a discussion of the effects of this on Latin American literature, see my *Políticas literarias: poder y acumulación en la literatura y el cine latinoamericanos* (Mexico City: FLACSO, 2012).

22. See Greimas, A. J. and Courtes, J. *Semiotics and Language: An Analytic Dictionary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

23. Moreiras, "A Beggaring Description", 74.

24. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 49-68.

25. In this regard, the novel might also be interpreted as providing a critical, fictional account of populism as it is set out, for example, in the work of Ernesto Laclau – as well as setting out its historical and political conditions within the republican tradition. Indeed, the work of Roa Bastos emerges in the 1940s in a developing and overlapping - Argentine and Paraguayan - context of populist ruptures (associated with generals Juan Domingo Perón and Alfredo Stroessner, who, on important occasions, helped each other out).

26. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 19-81.

27. See Lucio Colletti. "Rousseau as a Critic of 'Civil Society'", in *From Rousseau to Lenin* (London: New Left Books, 1972), 143-193.

28. I make some preliminary observations on the dictator's writing in *Políticas literarias*, 97-109.

29. This is the term Roa Bastos uses to name his Paraguayan trilogy of novels: *Hijo de hombre*, *Yo el Supremo* and *El fiscal*.

30. See Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas*. For Roa Bastos's views on the political conjuncture in which he was writing the novel, see his "América Latina en *Marcha*". Echoing the language of El Supremos's revolutionary enthusiasm, Roa Bastos over-optimistically writes: "At a time in which, having crushed an anti-popular and repressive system precisely because it was allied with foreign imperialism and local oligarchies whose agents have been rightly labelled forces of occupation...; at a time in which this popular will is translated into acts of sovereign power..., or its definitive relocation amongst the countries of the Third World struggling for their liberation

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under the sign of revolutionary socialism... Latin America's second emancipation is unfolding [*está en marcha*]. Its wave is overwhelming. No force on earth can stop it now" (my translation). On the political horizon at the time is the foreseen return of General Perón, the conflict between Peronisms of the Right and Left, rural and urban protest and guerrilla warfare, and the unforeseen ferocious military coup of 1976, one year after the publication of *I the Supreme*, that will put an end to the enthusiasm and dreams of Roa Bastos and so many others.