

Augusto Roa Bastos's Trilogy as Postmodern Practice

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Roa Bastos's most recent novel, *El fiscal* (1993), contains an introductory note proclaiming that his three novels, *Hijo de hombre* (1960), *Yo el Supremo* (1974), and *El fiscal* (1993), "form a trilogy on the 'monotheism' of power" (*El fiscal* 9). Although it is certainly true that each of these novels is a reflection on dictatorship and Paraguay's effort to combat it, there are other, perhaps more significant traits that unite these texts and make them part of a larger whole. The three novels, taken as a unit, focus on four of the most important events of Paraguay's history: *Hijo de hombre* presents a vision of the Chaco War, a border dispute with Bolivia (1932-1935) in which many Paraguayans died, as well as of a series of Paraguayan civil wars; *Yo el Supremo* focuses on the dictatorship of José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, who governed Paraguay from 1814 to 1840, and *El fiscal* recounts the War of the Triple Alliance, which Paraguay fought against Uruguay, Argentina, and Brazil from 1864-1870. *El fiscal* swings back and forth between the past era of Francisco Solano López, the president who led this war, and the present era of the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989). Stroessner is also frequently alluded to in *Yo el Supremo*.

That these novels are historical does not make them a "trilogy." It is the way in which all three novels use history that unifies them into a larger whole. First, each novel focuses on Paraguay's history as a way of defining Paraguay's identity and the nature of its people. Each attempts to create an understanding of what it means to be Paraguayan and how the people of a nation are the product of their history. Second, each novel in the trilogy analyzes Paraguayan history and identity through an approach which clearly exhibits postmodernist tendencies, although the degree to which this is true

varies from novel to novel. *Hijo de hombre* exhibits both modern and postmodern characteristics, while *Yo el Supremo* is the most postmodern of the trilogy.

Postmodernism is a controversial term which has been used to describe a variety of different cultural products and to which diverse definitions have been ascribed. Linda Hutcheon defines postmodern fiction as a continuation of certain modernist practices, such as innovation, self-reflexivity, and fragmentation, and, at the same time, a rupture with other modernist tendencies, such as creating a totalizing effect, emphasizing the autonomy of art, and promoting cultural elitism. Postmodern art is characterized by irony and parody (principally aimed at modernist conventions and historical-political contexts). In addition, Hutcheon states that postmodern art questions a number of relationships and prior assumptions including authorial originality, the validity of literary and historical knowledge (due to their status as human construct), the separation of the aesthetic from the political, the relationship between language and its referents, and the connection between various texts. Postmodern works also involve mixing genres and disciplines (such as novel and history), and frequently focus on local or regional elements (x-xi, 3-21, 50-51).

Scott Lash defines postmodernism as a process of de-differentiation in various spheres (in contrast with the process of differentiation associated with modernism): the mixing of the aesthetic with the theoretical and/or political, the blurring of popular and high culture, the disintegration of the author or his merging with the cultural product, and the problematizing of the relationship between signifier, signified, and referent (5-120).

Jim Collins asserts that the fundamental difference between modernist and postmodernist texts is that the latter

differ from the popular and literary texts produced during the Modernist stage in that they replace "poetic" stylization with a *bricolage* of diverse forms of already well-established aesthetic discourses. This process of juxtaposing what had become almost "walled" discourses (self-isolated by style and institution), radically undermines the "purity" that defines both generic and avant-garde textual production in the Modernist period . . . where the narrative discourses of the Modernist era define themselves over and against other forms of discourse as privileged modes of representation, the narratives of this fourth

Post-Modern stage are founded on the recognition that no one discourse can be sufficient, whether pulp romance or Freudian theory. (74-76)

Each of these definitions of postmodernism isolates specific characteristics that can be applied to the analysis of literary texts. According to Santiago Colás, the problem with these theories is that they fail to link postmodernism to the cultural, economic, and political forces that motivate the writing of postmodernist texts in the first place. Colás, using Frederic Jameson's ideas as a departure point, elaborates a theory of postmodernism based on the development of Argentine literature from the 1960s through the 1980s. He defines postmodernism as a response to economic and political forces, both local and global, notably the crisis of capitalism that took place in the 1970s. World capitalism suffered a general downturn due to capitalist overproduction and a rise in oil prices. These events resulted in a huge balance of payments deficits for many Latin American countries (Colás 113). For Colás, the fundamental distinction between modern and postmodern texts is that modernism believes in the possibility of utopia, which is paralleled by the ideology of the Cuban Revolution and which served as an inspiration for many of the Latin American "Boom" novels. In contrast, postmodernism rejects the concepts of purity, totality, and utopia associated with modernism, resisting, in Colás's words,

the belief that contemporary societies and human beings are beset by a condition that can be reduced to a single principle and therefore remedied by one response generated out of that single rationality. It does criticize the process by which the utopian impulse as a never realizable driving force for social change slowly blocks—in the discourse of its ideologists—our view of a conflictual, necessarily only partially achieved reality. (74)

Colás, citing Laclau and Mouffe, states that postmodernism's chief characteristic is that it rejects "the discourse of the universal and its implicit assumption of a privileged point of access to 'the truth,' which can be reached only by a limited number of subjects" (172). Colás uses Ricardo Piglia's *Respiración artificial* as the paradigm of the Argentine postmodernist text, stating that

[t]he *historias*, like Piglia's, were not resistant because they stridently asserted an alternative history drawn gleaming with

truth from the mire of repressive pseudo-histories. They resisted, rather, because they recognized and narrated, from their own painful experience of catastrophe—the project of remaking history, of reconstructing the future, as an ongoing and impure process, a process involving the recognition of limits, gaps, and compromises. (172)

Despite Colás's criticism of Hutcheon and of theories like hers, his own view of postmodernism is not incompatible with these theories, but rather supplements and broadens the understanding of postmodernism that they provide by contextualizing postmodern practice. Thus, it is the intention of this study to analyze the novels of Roa Bastos's trilogy as postmodern practice, by applying the common characteristics posited by the theories examined here, as well as attempting to contextualize the historical-political forces to which these novels clearly are a response. In doing so, I will by no means strictly apply Colás's Marxist approach to Roa Bastos's work, but rather simply show how these novels reject the concepts of totality, purity, and utopia as a result of the Paraguayan reality that produced them and how they attempt to comprehend and combat that reality.

It can be said that the novels of Roa Bastos's trilogy share certain postmodern characteristics, most notably the questioning of historical and literary knowledge (which is tantamount to Colás's rejection of purity, utopia, and totality). They also share a lack of separation of the aesthetic and the political, the mixing of various genres and disciplines (both show the process of de-differentiation to which Lash refers as well as the *bricolage* of discourses cited by Collins), and the questioning of the relationship between language and its referents. Finally, they all examine the relationship between different texts. Although other postmodern characteristics are undoubtedly present, such as the use of irony and parody in *Yo el Supremo*, the aforementioned elements are the common denominators shared by the novels of the trilogy and thus form the focus of this study.

The trilogy begins with *Hijo de hombre*, originally published in 1960, but modified by the author in 1983.¹ The date of its original publication coincides with the introduction of the term "postmodernism" in the field of literary criticism. According to Carlos Rincón, "the art of narrative plays a different role today than it did in the early 1960s, when the term postmodernism was introduced for the first time in

North American literary discussion to characterize novels that sought the de-hierarchization of the modernist separation of elite and mass cultures" (224).

Hijo de hombre portrays Paraguay's history as a series of wars and revolutions on the part of its citizens in an effort to gain political and social justice. This struggle is cyclical in nature, as seen by the connections that can be established between the novel's ten sections. Each chapter focuses on a different rebellion (for instance, the fight to obtain recognition of Gaspar Mora's Christ image in Section 1, the escape of Casiano and Nati Jara from the *mate* fields, pursued by a ruthless overseer, in Section 4, the frustrated revolution inadvertently betrayed by Miguel Vera in Section 5, and Cristóbol Jara's mission of bringing water to the Paraguayan army during the Chaco War in Section 8). Although some of these efforts are unsuccessful, the fact that there is always another effort indicates the hope that the Paraguayans will achieve their goal. We are told this more explicitly by one of the narrators, Miguel Vera, when he speaks of the Paraguayan revolutionaries:

Pero para estos hombres sólo cuenta el futuro. . . . No piensan en la muerte. Se sienten vivir en los hechos. Se sienten unidos en la pasión del instante que los proyecta fuera de sí mismos, ligándolos a una causa verdadera o engañosa, pero a algo. . . . La aguja de la sed marca para ellos la dirección del agua en el desierto, el más misterioso, sediento e ilimitado de todos: el corazón humano. La fuerza de su indestructible fraternidad es su Dios. La aplastan, la rompen, la desmenuzan, pero vuelve a recomponerse de los fragmentos, cada vez más viva y pujante. Y sus ciclos expanden en espiral. En todo Itapé, como en muchos otros pueblos, fermenta nuevamente la revuelta. . . .

But for these men only the future counts. They do not think of death. They feel alive through action. They are united in the passion of the moment that projects them outside of themselves, joining them in an authentic or deceitful cause, but in something. . . . The compass needle of thirst marks for them the direction of water in the desert, the most mysterious, thirsty and unlimited desert of them all: the human heart. The force of its indestructible fraternity is their God. They crush it, they break it, they tear it apart, but it recomposes itself out of the fragments, each time more alive and forceful. And its cycles expand

in spirals. In all of Itapé, as in many other villages, rebellion is beginning to ferment again. . . . (373)²

Despite Paraguay's many civil wars pitting brother against brother, this fraternity cannot be destroyed. However, the senselessness of man killing his fellow man is captured by the Chaco conflict. Although the Chaco War was not a civil war, but rather a border dispute between Bolivia and Paraguay, the conflict is ultimately seen as a battle between brothers who end up united once again in the common fate of death:

En el islote de un pirizal, la aguadita de un pozo indio ha quedado en tierra de nadie, batida simultáneamente por una pesada boliviana y por la de un retén paraguayo. Oculto entre los matorrales, observé, con el binóculo ese dechado de naturaleza muerta. Bajo el ángulo convergente de fuego hay un tendal de cadáveres, apilados alrededor del pozo. Algunos han alcanzado a hundir la cara en el tajar y allí se han quedado hasta la eternidad. Otros se abrazan estrechamente, quietos y saciados. Uniformes kakis y verdeolivos confundidos, hilvanados por cuajarones carmesís, cosidos a una indestructible fraternidad.

In the island of a *pirizal*, the water of a well has remained in no man's land, simultaneously attacked by Bolivian heavy artillery and Paraguayan reserves. Hidden in the bushes I observed this paragon of dead nature. Under the converging angle of fire there is a heap of cadavers piled up around the well. Some have managed to sink their faces in the water and there they remained drinking for all eternity. Others are narrowly embraced, quiet and satiated. Khaki and olive green uniforms are confused, threaded together by red clots sewn in an indestructible fraternity. (260)

Just as in the previous quotation, quenching thirst is a symbol of indestructible solidarity, and thus an important element in Roa Bastos's fiction, where Paraguayan character is defined in terms of this fraternity.³ This idealistic vision evokes the modernist belief in utopia defined by Colás. Thus, the original *Hijo de hombre* in some ways appears to be modern as opposed to postmodern. However, as we shall see, its rewriting in 1983 injects many postmodern concerns that convert the novel into a borderline phenomenon or postmodern precursor.

As the above quotations show, *Hijo de hombre* melds both fiction and history, as well as the aesthetic development of the novel, with a political message. This implies a postmodernist tendency within its modernist vision of a fraternal utopia.

Yo el Supremo's portrayal of the nineteenth-century dictator, Dr. Francia, also interprets history as a series of struggles, this time external in nature. Dr. Francia is depicted as a power-obsessed tyrant whose redeeming feature was his ability to keep Paraguay autonomous and independent from its imperialistic neighbors. El Supremo, in a document called the "Circular perpetua," narrates Paraguay's history. This narration ranges from the 1717 rebellion of the "comuneros," the revolt of the Paraguayan citizens against the corrupt colonial Spanish governors, to their attempt to institute self-government through Dr. Francia's own regime (1814-1840) (with some future allusions). The dictator traces constant attempts on the part of Argentina and Brazil, his country's powerful neighbors, to annex Paraguay. Thus, Dr. Francia is seen as part of a revolutionary process that goes awry when his rule deteriorates into an arbitrary exertion of absolute power. The voice of his conscience reveals that Dr. Francia's mistake was to betray the solidarity that defines Paraguay and its people and to attempt to realize the revolution on his own, instead of in collaboration with his fellow men, which is the true Paraguayan spirit:⁴

Creíste que la Patria que ayudaste a nacer, que la Revolución que salió armada de tu cráneo empezaban-acababan en ti. Tu propia soberbia te hizo decir que eras hijo de un parto terrible y de un principio de mezcla. . . . Dejaste de creer en Dios pero tampoco creíste en el pueblo con la verdadera mística de la Revolución; única que lleva a un verdadero conductor a identificarse con su causa. . . . Te quedaste a mitad de camino y no formaste verdaderos dirigentes revolucionarios.

You believed that the Country you helped bring to birth, that the Revolution that came forth armed from your cranium, began-ended in you. Your own pride made you say that you were the offspring of a terrible parturition and a principle of mixture. . . . You ceased to believe in God, but neither did you believe in the people with the true mystique of Revolution; the only one that leads a true locomotive-engineer of history to identify himself with its cause, not use it as a hiding place from his absolute

vertical Person, in which worms are now feeding horizontally. . . .
 You stopped halfway, and did not form true revolutionary lead-
 ers. (*Yo el Supremo* 454; *I the Supreme* 422-23)⁵

The way in which Dr. Francia is portrayed and his role in the formation of the Paraguayan nation in the novel are very postmodern. Through the construction of the dictator's voice and the quotations from historical texts—both real and fictitious—cited in the novel's footnotes, the subjectivity and ideological component of both history and literature are constantly exposed, and history's constructive process is continually parodied. This use of citation and parody helps to provide a more balanced portrait of the dictator than the one offered by most of the existing historiography on Dr. Francia.⁶

In *Yo el Supremo* Roa Bastos does not offer an alternative history, but rather deconstructs history by parodying the ways in which historical texts are written. Just as Colás posits Piglia's *Respiración artificial* as a reaction to the post-Peronist military coup known as the "Proceso de reorganización" in Argentina, in many ways *Yo el Supremo* is a reaction to the Stroessner dictatorship (1954-1989) in Paraguay. Alfredo Stroessner appropriated the figure of Dr. Francia as his predecessor in defense of Paraguayan nationalism. This is seen in the novel's appendix in the Stroessner regime's attempts to locate Dr. Francia's remains during the 1960s. *Yo el Supremo* both confirms and negates Stroessner's identification with Dr. Francia in its portrait of the dictator. It implicitly rejects Stroessner's self-portrayal as Francia's descendant with regard to a nationalistic protection of Paraguay's autonomy. The novel repeatedly shows Dr. Francia's attempts to fight off British, Brazilian, and Argentine imperialism during the nineteenth century, in contrast to its evocation of some imperialistic events sanctioned by Stroessner, such as the Brazilian construction of the dams in Itapú, authorized by the contemporary dictator. In the same vein, *Yo el Supremo*'s criticism of Francia's obsession with absolute power can be understood on a dual level, simultaneously directed at Stroessner, who was still dictator at the time of the novel's writing. The novel undoubtedly responds to political forces, but offers no monolithic interpretation of Paraguay's past, nor any simplistic, idealistic solutions for its future.

The revolutionary process culminates in the third novel of the trilogy, *El fiscal*. The novel's protagonist, the exiled Paraguayan Félix Moral, lives with the hope of avenging his country, which suf-

fers under the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner. According to Moral, Paraguay “deserves another destiny, full of heroes and anonymous martyrs everywhere without a cross or tombstone to remember their names, just as El Supremo Francia decreed over a century ago” (171). Thus, in solidarity with the fate of his countrymen, and following the tradition already outlined in *Hijo de hombre* and *Yo el Supremo*, Moral sets out to assassinate Stroessner, a task which he defines as his ultimate destiny:

¡Estrechar la mano al tiranosaurio! ¡Vaya honor! ¿No era esto una de esas figuras increíbles que suele tejer el azar? No. Era algo bien concreto y definido, una situación marcada a escuadra en tiempo y lugar bien definidos. Podía ser éste el instante único y excepcional en el que vengo pensando desde hace bastante tiempo. Todo mi ser se tendió hacia ese momento definitivo en el que, en un fogonazo infinitesimal, uno se convierte en lo que debe ser y hace lo que debe hacer.

Shake the tyrannosaurus' hand! What an honor! Wasn't this one of those incredible patterns that chance usually weaves? No. It was something concrete and well defined, a right-angled situation marked in a well-defined time and place. This could be the unique and exceptional moment which I have been thinking about for a good deal of time. My entire being stretched itself toward this definitive moment in which in a minute flash one is converted into what he or she should be and does what he or she must do. (167)

Thus, the narrator's entire life is defined by his effort to free Paraguay from Stroessner's tyranny. Moral, representative of his compatriots, defines himself in terms of his nation's struggle for freedom and justice.

El fiscal centers not only on Stroessner's dictatorship, but also on the War of the Triple Alliance in which Paraguay's president, Francisco Solano López, led his country on a suicide mission against Uruguay, Argentina, and Brazil. The war, which Paraguay had no real hope of winning, wiped out most of the country's male population. Despite López's dictatorship and obsession with a lost cause, he is not seen as a totally negative figure, but rather as a martyr, thanks to his subsequent murder and supposed crucifixion by the Brazilians.⁷ López is re-examined as a complex figure, defined not only as a tyrant and destroyer of his nation, but also by his heroic

effort, just as all the other Paraguayans we have seen. Roa's constant comparison of López's crucifixion to Matheus Grünewald's paintings of Christ helps further to link *El fiscal* to *Hijo de hombre*, where Christian symbols are a constant motif (for instance, Gaspar Mora, the kindly carpenter, is likened to Christ, and María Rosa, the good-natured prostitute redeemed by Mora, is similar to Mary Magdalene).⁸

The narrator of *El fiscal*, Félix Moral, manages to fuse these two different time periods (those of Stroessner and Solano López) through his narration of his attempt to film a documentary in Paraguay about Solano López. Moreover, there are constant connections between the two. For example, when Moral fails in his mission to assassinate Stroessner, he is captured, tortured, and imprisoned. His girlfriend, Jimena, travels from France to Paraguay and executes an elaborate plan to help Moral escape. Since he cannot possibly travel by plane undetected, his only means of escape is by foot across the border to Brazil in a sequence that fuses Moral's escape with the annual re-enactment of the crucifixion of Solano López and pilgrimage made to the site of his death. This fusion of distinct historical moments, needless to say, is intentional. López's madness/heroism is that of the narrator's—each Paraguayan has made a heroic but impossible effort to save his country and to escape death. Both Moral and López fail because each proposes a utopian project that cannot be realized. This coincides with Colás's definition of the postmodernist text's rejection of utopia in favor of the recognition of the impurity and partiality of any process. Thus, while Moral's project fails, the novel ends with the ousting of Stroessner through a military coup that promises a transition to a democratic government with future elections. This ending both reflects Paraguayan reality and shows how any political struggle is a contradictory process of evolution as opposed to an automatic achievement of justice and perfection.

Similarly, following the message of contradiction outlined in the previous examples, the novel's title can be understood on a dual level. *El fiscal*, or *The Prosecutor*, refers to Moral's role as executor of justice. He speaks of his relationship to the other "fiscales de la tiranía" 'prosecutors of tyranny' (198) in his attempt to kill Stroessner. However, the title also refers to Father Fidel Maíz, known as "el fiscal de sangre" 'the prosecutor of blood,' who prosecuted those unfaithful to López during the War of the Triple Alliance and was accused of being anything but just in his actions.⁹

The 1983 version of *Hijo de hombre* also uses the figure of Father Maíz to create a postmodern, contradictory image of the historical figure. In the 1960 version of the novel, Maíz is the thrilling orator who recognizes the significance of the Christ figure made by Gaspar Mora in his Good Friday sermon (Section 1 of the novel). However, in the 1983 version, Roa adds a passage about Maíz that criticizes his role as “fiscal de sangre” during López’s regime. Thus, Maíz becomes a somewhat ambiguous figure. Miguel Vera states in his diary in the 1983 version when he is reading Maíz’s book:

He aquí los fundamentos de la justicia humana expuestos por un fiscal de sangre que sabía mucho de su oficio y magisterio. Alguien debería escribir alguna vez la historia de la gente como Maíz porque llegará un día en que patibularios fiscales se arrojarán el derecho de juzgar y condenar a este pueblo como si estuviera compuesto enteramente de cretinos y bastardos.

Here I have the foundations of human justice explained by a prosecutor of blood who knew a lot about his job and teaching. Someone should write the story of people like Maíz sometime because the day will come when sinister prosecutors will assume the right of judging and condemning this nation as if it were composed entirely of idiots and bastards. (231)

This image of Maíz is more contradictory, more complex, and thus more postmodern than the one in the original *Hijo de hombre*.

Hijo de hombre, *Yo el Supremo* and *El fiscal* all use historical texts as sources, but each in a different way. *Hijo de hombre* does not mention any specific historical text although it is clearly historically based. In contrast, *Yo el Supremo*, as already noted, both implicitly and explicitly cites many historical works on Doctor Francia. Through explicit citation, the novelist suggests that readers consult specific sources and encourages them to establish an intertextual dialogue between these texts and the novel. This dialogue with and parody of history clearly reveals history as human construct and falls within postmodern practice.

El fiscal mentions and pretends to cite from at least one major historical source—Sir Richard Francis Burton’s *Letters from the Battle-Fields of Paraguay*. Upon consulting this source, unlike the case of *Yo el Supremo*, in which Roa Bastos’s “plagiarism” from historical sources was largely confirmed, we find that all the pas-

sages and quotations Roa Bastos claims to originate in this text are actually invented by the novelist.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the author achieves here the same effect he created with accurate quotation in *Yo el Supremo*. The citations serve to confuse the borders of history and fiction and to help the reader realize that the difference between reality and fiction is not so easily discernible, in a clearly postmodern fashion.

The focus on history as an expression of Paraguay's character is the primary element upon which Roa Bastos's trilogy is based. There are, however, a series of secondary motifs and connections which underscore the relationship between these novels and thus further validate their status as a trilogy. Many of these connections are also postmodern characteristics. The first trait is that each novel provides a reflection on the writing process, which naturally springs from its focus on historical subjects. The writing of history is not seen as the recording of pure truth or fact, but as an interpretation that depends on many factors, and which always exhibits an ideological component. As Hayden White states:

no given set of casually recorded historical events in themselves constitute a story; the most that they offer to the historian are story elements. The elements are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like—in short, all the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play. . . . The important point is that most historical sequences can be emplotted in a number of different ways so as to provide different interpretations of those events and to endow them with different meanings. (84)

Consequently, the validity of writing, especially as a vehicle of expression of history (as well as history itself), is questioned.

This reflection on writing did not appear as an element in the original version of *Hijo de hombre*, but rather was added in the 1983 version. An example is a passage added to Miguel Vera's diary in which he states:

Viejo vicio, éste de la escritura. Círculo vicioso que se vuelve virtuoso cuando se cierra hacia afuera. Una manera de huir del

no-lugar hacia el espacio estable de los signos; una manera de buscar el lugar que se llevó nuestro lugar a otro lugar.

An old vice, this one of writing. Vicious circle that becomes virtuous when it closes itself to the outside. A way of fleeing from no place toward the stable space of signs, a way of looking for the place that carried our place to another place. (236)

This is a good example of the way in which Roa “updates” *Hijo de hombre* and attempts to bring it into the postmodern stream.

Yo el Supremo is full of the dictator’s invectives against writing, since he has been defamed by a series of historical texts, which have made him the center of a “black legend.” The novel constantly asserts that written language is incapable of authentic expression. As the compiler states in his final note:

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. En consecuencia, los personajes y hechos que figuran en ellos han ganado, por fatalidad del lenguaje escrito, el derecho a una existencia ficticia y autónoma al servicio del no menos ficticio y autónomo lector. (467)

the re-scriptor declares, in the words of a contemporary author, that the history contained in these Notes is reduced to the fact that the story that should have been told in them has not been told. As a consequence, the characters and facts that figure in them have earned, through the fatality of the written language, the right to a fictitious and autonomous existence in the service of the no less fictitious and autonomous reader. (435)

We hear echoes of this final note when Moral comments on the screenplay about Francisco Solano López in *El fiscal*:

Es sólo un libreto para una película. Relata los hechos del pasado bañados en el aguafuerte de la época contemporánea. . . . El libreto era apenas el negativo de una historia que no se podía narrar en ningún lenguaje. Aquel acontecimiento fantasmagórico superaba todos los límites de la imaginación y las posibilidades de expresión de la palabra y de la imagen.

It is only the screenplay for a movie. It relates the facts of the past covered by the etching of the contemporary era. The screenplay was barely the negative of a history that could not be narrated in any language. That phantasmagoric occurrence exceeded all the limits of the imagination and the possibilities of expression of the word and the image. (36)

In both *Yo el Supremo* and *El fiscal* this lack of faith in the written word is explicitly applied to the historical subject. The following two passages supplement each other, by indicating that any one viewpoint needs to be combined with others in order to approach an accurate portrait of reality. In *Yo el Supremo* we are told: "Si a toda costa se quiere hablar de alguien no sólo tiene uno que ponerse en su lugar: tiene que ser ese alguien. Unicamente el semejante puede escribir sobre el semejante" 'If one wishes at all costs to speak of someone, one must not only put oneself in that someone's place; one must be that someone. Only like can write about like' (*Yo* 35; *I* 29). In *El fiscal* we are presented with the opposite situation: "Si tuviera uno que relatar su vida tendría que hacerlo como si se tratara de la vida de otra persona; pedir a los demás datos, recuerdos, opiniones" 'If one had to relate his or her life one would have to do it as if one were dealing with the life of another person, asking others for facts, memories, opinions' (26).

Similarly, to underscore the focus on writing, both *Yo el Supremo* and *El fiscal* provide their protagonists with special writing instruments. In *El fiscal*, the narrator's friend Clovis lends him his pen that "escribe por espejo en oscuro" 'writes through a mirror in the dark' (245); the pen is described as

una lapicera negra, a pilas, pero increíblemente liviana. . . . Está hecha con la raíz del amorphophallus, una especie de planta milenaria, ya extinta, de la antigua Indochina. Es un recuerdo de la guerra de Camboya, el símbolo de la planta sagrada en forma de pez. Ves estas capas superpuestas en forma de escamas de rodaballo, el pez de las profundidades. El mango de la pluma está estriado de venas que parecen dilatarse y contraerse bajo la presión de la mano. . . . El artefacto es vivo y activo. Lo bueno es que sea eficaz.

a black pen holder, running on batteries, but incredibly light. . . . It is made with the root of the amorphophallus, a species of millenary plant, already extinct, from ancient Indochina. It is a

souvenir from the Cambodian war, the symbol of the sacred plant in the form of a fish. You see these superimposed layers in the form of scales of the Turbot, a deep water fish. The handle of the pen is fluted with veins that seem to expand and contract under the pressure of the hand. The artifact is alive and active. The good thing is that it is efficient. (246)

In *Yo el Supremo*, the dictator possesses a pen which can simultaneously write, produce images, and make sounds, thus creating a more precise form of writing. It is described thus in the novel:

Se trata de una pluma cilíndrica. . . . Engastado en el hueco del tubo cilíndrico, apenas más extenso que un punto brillante, está el lente-recuerdo que lo convierte en un insólito utensilio con dos diferentes aunque coordinadas funciones. Escribir al mismo tiempo que visualizar las formas de otro lenguaje compuesto exclusivamente con imágenes. . . . (214)

This is a cylindrical pen. . . . Mounted in the hollow of the cylindrical tube, scarcely larger than a very bright point, is the memory-lens that turns it into a most unusual instrument with two different yet coordinated functions: writing while at the same time visualizing the forms of another language exclusively of images. . . . (197)

In all three novels, the counterpart of this mistrust of the written word is faith in the people's oral tradition. This tradition is passed down by the elderly to the younger generation, and thus all three novels include references to centenarians who are responsible for perpetuating Paraguay's history and legends. In *Hijo de hombre* we have Macario Francia, who recounts, among other things, the story of Gaspar Mora. In *Yo el Supremo* there are Mateo Fleitas and Loizaga's ex-slave, who pass on the oral tradition.¹¹ In *El fiscal*, when Jimena traveled to Paraguay, "La anciana campesina inició a Jimena en la historia oral del país. . . . La anciana desdentada, casi centenaria . . . no sabía leer, no sabía escribir. . . . Pero sabía de esas cosas del otro lado de la vida" 'The elderly peasant woman initiated Jimena in the country's oral history. . . . The toothless old woman, almost a centenarian . . . didn't know how to read, didn't know how to write. . . . But she knew about things from the other side of life' (65). Thus, the valuing of oral tradition is born of the postmodern questioning of the expressive accuracy of writing.

As I noted in a separate study, the value of oral tradition is enhanced in the 1983 version of *Hijo de hombre* (Weldt-Basson, "A Genetic Approach" 141). Here Roa adds an entire passage that focuses on the parrot's song when Vera is in prison (224). Similarly, in *Yo el Supremo* we are told repeatedly that the parrot's language is more authentic than ours because it is strictly oral. This is another example of how Roa rewrites *Hijo de hombre* to make it more postmodern.

In addition to the focus on writing, a second connection that underscores the unity of *Hijo de hombre*, *Yo el Supremo*, and *El fiscal* is their narrative structure. Each novel is at least partially, if not totally, narrated by a first-person narrator/protagonist, who writes down his thoughts in some type of intimate diary or personal letter. In *Hijo de hombre* the odd-numbered chapters are the first-person narration of Miguel Vera. In section seven ("Destinados") of this novel, Vera records his experiences in prison and in the Chaco War in a daily journal. *Yo el Supremo* is primarily the first-person narration of the dictator El Supremo, among whose papers figure his "Private Notebook" ('Cuaderno Privado'). Finally, *El fiscal* is entirely the first-person narration of the exiled Paraguayan Félix Moral. The second part of the novel consists of Moral's thoughts captured on paper in an intimate letter to his girlfriend, Jimena. Thus, each protagonist is also a writer of sorts, and this takes us back to each novel's postmodern preoccupation with the relationship between language and its referents.

The connection between narrators does not end with this first-person narration. In particular, there exists a somewhat enigmatic relationship between the narrator of *Hijo de hombre*, Miguel Vera, and that of *El fiscal*, Félix Moral. Miguel Vera narrates the odd-numbered chapters of *Hijo de hombre* (there is a third-person omniscient narrator in the even-numbered chapters which some critics have also attributed to Vera but which are not specifically designated as such). He tells the story of his youth in the village of Itapé listening to the stories of Macario Francia, his trip to military school on the train passing through Sapukai to Asunción, his inadvertent betrayal of the revolution, and his imprisonment and participation in the Chaco War. The narrator of *El fiscal*, Félix Moral, is an exiled Paraguayan who has changed his identity with the help of plastic surgery. He tells us that he is also from Itapé, and speaks of the trains from the south to Asunción as well:

Lo mismo que Laurel, el pequeño perro criollo de mi infancia en Manorá. Murió mordido por una nandurié, una víbora pequeña. . . . Fue entonces cuando cambié el nombre de Itapé por el de Manorá, que quiere decir en guaraní Lugar-para-la-muerte.

The same as Laurel, the small Creole dog from my childhood in Manor. He died bitten by a nanduri, a small snake. . . . That was when I changed the name of the village from Itapé to Manor, which means Place-for-death in Guarani. (52)

En esos trenes del ferrocarril del Sur, venía yo a Asunción desde mi aldea de Iturbe del Manorá para continuar la escuela y el colegio. De aquellos viajes sólo recuerdo el aroma apetitoso de los chipás de Piragú.

In those railroad trains from the South I came to Asunción from my village of Iturbe del Manor to continue elementary and high school. From those trips I only remember the appetizing aroma of the *chipás* of Piragú. (315)

These two passages make the narrator Moral sound like a reincarnation of Miguel Vera. They both came from the same town, rode the same train, completed school in Asunción, and fondly recalled the chipá vendors. If Moral isn't Vera (Vera dies at the end of *Hijo de hombre*), he is a close substitute, a man who could be his brother, who shared the same experiences. Moral acts as a double for Miguel Vera and redeems his actions in the prior novel. Vera is the intellectual incapable of action, who accidentally betrays the revolutionary plans while drunk. Moral is the intellectual who defines his entire existence in terms of the moment in which he takes action and attempts to assassinate the dictator. Consequently, Moral ends up redeeming the indecisiveness of his double through his single-minded, heroic efforts. This intratextual ambiguity might also be considered a trait characteristic of postmodern practice.

The trilogy *Hijo de hombre*, *Yo el Supremo*, and *El fiscal*, in a postmodern vein, questions the objectivity of history, and yet simultaneously leads the reader through a journey across this very history, providing an interpretation of how Paraguay's history has shaped the identity of the nation and its individuals. We are simultaneously shown the Paraguayan heroic spirit and how this spirit has been suppressed by the forces of dictatorship. Both *Yo el Supremo* and *El fiscal* contain passages in which this oppression is

symbolized by Paraguayans who fail to walk upright. In *El fiscal*, when Moral returns to Paraguay he observes: “Los peatones, de los que no alcanzo a ver los rostros, caminan encorvados, las cabezas gachas, mirando obstinadamente las cerámicas vitrificadas de las aceras” ‘The pedestrians, whose faces I cannot manage to see, walk bent over, their faces pasty, obstinately looking at the vitrified ceramics of the pavement’ (246). In *Yo el Supremo*, the dictator asks Dr. Rengger to do an autopsy on some of his soldiers to see if Paraguayans have a hidden bone in their necks which prevents them from holding their heads up: “Quiero saber por qué mis compatriotas no pueden levantar la cabeza. ¿Qué hay de eso? No hay ningún hueso, me dice usted. Debe haber entonces algo peor, algún peso que les voltea la cabeza sobre el pecho” ‘I want to know why my compatriots are unable to lift up their heads. What answer can you give me? There’s no bone, you tell me. There must be something worse then; some weight that makes their heads fall down onto their chests’ (121). Paraguay’s existence as a nation is characterized by this cycle of submission and rebellion, always ending on a hopeful, but not blindly idealistic note: *Hijo de hombre* concludes with the rumors of another revolution about to begin, *Yo el Supremo* ends with the dictator’s death, and *El fiscal* terminates with a successful coup ousting Stroessner in 1989, in favor of a government promising a transition to democracy and future elections. Thus, *El fiscal*, which was originally written when Stroessner was still dictator and then destroyed and rewritten when he was deposed, in order to reflect Paraguayan reality, closes Roa Bastos’s postmodern cycle of novels on power and dictatorship.

Notes

1. Note that all citations from *Hijo de hombre* will be taken from the 1960 version unless otherwise specified. For a detailed study of the modifications in the 1983 version see my “A Genetic Approach to Augusto Roa Bastos’s *Hijo de hombre*.”

2. All translations are mine unless otherwise specified.

3. See Jean Andreu, “El hombre y el agua en la obra de Augusto Roa Bastos,” for a detailed analysis of water symbolism in *Hijo de hombre* and *Yo el Supremo*.

4. Many critics view this voice in the final pages of the novel as a manifestation of the dictator's conscience. See the following studies: Raúl Dorra, "Yo el Supremo: La circular perpetua" (66); Luis María Ferrer Agüero, "El universo narrativo de Augusto Roa Bastos" (383); David William Foster, *Augusto Roa Bastos* (97); Martin Lienhard, "Apuntes sobre los desdoblamientos, la mitología americana y la escritura en *Yo el Supremo*" (4); Juan Manuel Marcos, *Roa Bastos, precursor del post-boom* (46); Eugenio Matus Romo, "Yo el Supremo: Maravilla y simbolismo" (22); and Alain Sicard, "Yo el Supremo de Augusto Roa Bastos: Le mythe et l'histoire" (788-89).
5. All English translations of the Spanish quotations from *Yo el Supremo* are taken from the novel's translation by Helen Lane.
6. These historical intertexts are studied in detail in my *Augusto Roa Bastos's I The Supreme: A Dialogic Perspective*.
7. I have been unable to find any reference to this crucifixion in the historical sources I consulted; it appears to be the novelist's invention used to underscore López's role as martyr. See R.B. Cunninghame Graham, *Portrait of a Dictator: Francisco Solano López (1865-1870)* and Gilbert Phelps, *Tragedy of Paraguay*.
8. Christian symbolism in *Hijo de hombre* has been thoroughly examined in the following studies: David William Foster, *The Myth of Paraguay in the Fiction of Augusto Roa Bastos*; Urte Lehnerdt, "Ensayo de interpretación de *Hijo de hombre* a través de su simbolismo cristiano y social"; and Adriana Valdés and Ignacio Rodríguez, "*Hijo de hombre*: el mito como fuerza social."
9. Maíz writes of his role in López's regime in *Etapas de mi vida*.
10. See Sir Richard Francis Burton, *Letters from the Battle-Fields of Paraguay*.
11. Valdés and Rodríguez study in detail Macario's role as Paraguay's collective unconscious. See "*Hijo de hombre*: el mito como fuerza social"; I discuss the significance of oral tradition with regard to its connection with Pascal's *Pensées* in *Augusto Roa Bastos's I The Supreme*, 188-89.

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