

The Secret Life of Patiño's Pen

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Augusto Roa Bastos's *Yo el Supremo*, published in 1974, is a monumental work by any measure. As part of a collection of texts published during the mid- to late decades of the twentieth century by various Latin American writers, *Yo el Supremo* has been identified with a broad category of Latin American fiction known as "dictator novels". Unlike most of the other texts that fall into this category, however, *Yo el Supremo*'s depicted dictator is neither purely fictional nor an amalgam of various real-life dictators all rolled into one. Instead, *Yo el Supremo*'s protagonist is the very real—if long since dead—José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, the dictatorial "founding father" of modern Paraguay, who led his nation from its "birth" following its declaration of independence from Spain in 1811 up through the moment of his own death in 1840. Likewise, Francia's well-known amanuensis, Policarpo Patiño, who figures prominently in the novel, was also a historical figure.

Given the monumental nature of *Yo el Supremo*, a brief description of the novel is in order. I say "description" instead of "synopsis" or "plot summary", because the plot (such as it is) is the least important aspect of this work. The putative plot of *Yo el Supremo* is the search for the author of a pasquinade that had been nailed to the door of the Asunción cathedral prior the beginning of the novel and whose text (supposedly "handwritten" rather than typeset like nearly all the rest of the book) appears on Roa Bastos's very first page. This pasquinade "ventriloquizes" Francia and declares: "Yo el Supremo Dictador de la República ordeno que al acaecer mi muerte mi cadáver sea decapitado; la cabeza puesta en una pica por tres días en la Plaza de la República [...] Al término del dicho plazo, mando que mis restos sean quemados y las cenizas arrojadas al río" (7). The novel's nascent detective story notwithstanding, the real "plot" of *Yo el Supremo* is actually the life of Francia. Nevertheless, readers would be hard pressed to reconstruct this biography from reading Roa Bastos's text alone. In fact, readers who bring to the novel an already very good knowledge of Francia's biography have a clear advantage over readers who do not. This is because the novel consists of some 460 pages of textual fragments—both historical and fictional—seemingly arranged in no particular order.

Regarding the structure of *Yo el Supremo*, Gina Loggie notes that the novel "displays an antagonism towards the notion of history as a linear progression", drawing on "poststructuralist thought and postmodernist strategy" in its interrogation of nineteenth-century ideas regarding historiography (78). Likewise, Daniel Balderston compares *Yo el Supremo* to an onion whose many layers continually peel away to reveal "la proliferación de detalles fantásticos" (156); while Wladimir Kryszinski compares the novel to Diego Velázquez's famous painting, *Las Meninas* (266).¹ Still, these fragments are largely—though not exclusively—grouped into three categories of material, as Roberto González Echevarría notes: "The first kind of text is what the Supremo dictates to his secretary, Policarpo Patiño, about what is happening in the present [...]. A second kind of text is the 'Circular Perpetua,' or 'Perpetual Memo' that the Supremo also dictates to Policarpo Patiño [...]. Finally there is what the Supremo writes himself in his "Private

¹ On *Yo el Supremo*'s postmodernism, see also González Echevarría (1985, 65); Toro; and Weldt-Basson (1998).

Notebook” (1980, 216-17). And what ties all this material together is the fictional character of the “Compilador”, whose task has been to sift through, organize, and comment on the various “found” documents included in the book, so that not only are there footnotes to accompany various segments, but often competing footnotes (and even footnotes within footnotes).

Now, if all this seems somewhat familiar to Cervantes scholars, the novel’s Cervantine quality is not coincidental, as Roa Bastos himself remarked during an interview in which he was asked about the Compilador:

El hecho que mencionas de que estos críticos y ensayistas algo apresurados hayan visto en *Yo el Supremo* una fuente historiográfica más fidedigna que las memorias y escritos publicados a mediados del siglo XIX, creo que debe atribuirse más que a la *verdad histórica* —que a mi juicio no existe en estado puro—, o a la eficacia literaria del texto (de cuyas limitaciones soy testigo consciente), a ese efecto suscitador de la unidad de los contrarios cuyo secreto aprendí a muy temprana edad en las obras de don Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. (Rivarola 97; original emphasis)

In fact, a number of critics —most of whom take as their point of departure the fact that the master/servant relationship between El Supremo and Patiño recalls the relationship between Don Quixote and Sancho— have all commented on the connection between Roa Bastos and Cervantes.² But the novel, which does indeed draw this parallel, also contains a great number of other references to Cervantes’s works. For instance, Amadís (at least as a first name), Mambrino’s helmet, Dulcinea, and even Cervantes himself all make a rhetorical appearance. Moreover, Patiño’s first name coincides with that of King Policarpo in *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*, a novel that is also explicitly mentioned in the text. Indeed, *Yo el Supremo* subtly mocks this coincidence by noting that Patiño’s chair is inscribed with the phrase “Policarpo I Rey del Paraguay” (406). Likewise, El Supremo’s occasional dialogues with his dog, Sultán, recall the conversation between Cipión and Berganza at the heart of “El coloquio de los perros”, as Gustavo Verdesio notes (1993, 38). Moreover, the ongoing dialogic exchange between the competing discourses of writing and orality in *Yo el Supremo* (which a great many critics have also examined) is clearly Cervantine in nature, even though Roa Bastos inverts their hierarchical positions by assigning orality to the master (who is quite literally a “dictator”) and writing to the servant (whose job it is to take down this supreme “dictation”).³

More importantly, in an acceptance speech given by Roa Bastos after winning the 1989 Premio Cervantes —a speech in which he glosses both *Don Quixote* and *Persiles y Sigismunda* in some detail— the author has this to say about *Yo el Supremo*’s literary provenance:

Alguna conseja de la tradición oral murmura en mi país que, en algún hoy de los antiguos tiempos, el Gran Karaí del Supremo Poder tenía en su austero y casi monacal despacho, colmado de libros y legajos, un atril proveniente de alguno de los templos confiscados [de los guaraní]. [...] Y *diz* también la conseja que sobre ese atril reposaba un gran libro

² On Cervantine readings of *Yo el Supremo*, see Brochard; Gardes de Fernández; Krynski; Recio Vela (2005-2006); Toro; and Verdesio (1993).

³ On writing and orality in *Yo el Supremo*, see Dónoan (8); Gazzolo; Parra Ortiz; Partyka; Song; Toro; and Verdesio (1993 and 2010).

abierto del que colgaba hasta el piso un señalador de púrpura. La memoriosa tradición oral no dice de qué libro se trataba. A la tradición le basta saber que sabe. [...] Eso dice la leyenda acerca del extraño libro que el Supremo Dictador leía y anotaba como un antiguo monje copista, o —según yo lo presumo— como otro furtivo Avellaneda que pretendía repetir por tercera vez el libro irrepetible, sin recordar la sentencia de Cide Hamete Benegeli sobre las aventuras del *Quijote*: “Sólo él pudo vivirlas, sólo yo pude escribirlas”. En la certidumbre de que no podía ser otro el libro, yo no hice más que poner, en mi novela, sobre el legendario atril, un libro, el Libro de todos los tiempos: el inmortal *Don Quijote de la Mancha* de don Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, Supremo Señor de la Imaginación y de la Lengua. (1990a, 52)

In another, slightly different version of this acceptance speech (tellingly published in *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* as “Don Quijote en el Paraguay”), Roa Bastos follows up the quote, “Sólo él pudo vivirlas, sólo yo pude escribirlas”, with a significant insertion that comes immediately before his final comments on *Don Quixote* itself:

En este punto empezó a trabajar contra *El Supremo* el personaje del Compilador, mezcla de Cide Hamete Benengeli, de escoliasta, acopiador o “copiador” de historias, contrahistorias, documentos, verdaderos o apócrifos, interlocutor antagonista —el único— de ese gran muerto interminable que seguía vivo en su monólogo de trasmundo, de más allá del poder y la palabra. (1990b, 16)

I am particularly interested in these references to Cide Hamete because readers familiar with *Don Quixote* will already have recognized two problems with Roa Bastos’s quotations from Cervantes’s novel. In the first place, the crucial line from *Don Quixote* actually reads: “Para mí sola nació don Quijote, y yo para él; él supo obrar y yo escribir” (II, 74, 592). In the second place, these words are not “spoken” by Cide Hamete, but rather by his pen, *la pluma* (ergo the feminine gender embedded in the phrase “Para mí sola nació don Quijote”). Thus, whether because he simply misremembers Cervantes’s line or because he deliberately wishes to shift its genesis away from an ostensibly inanimate object and onto one of Cervantes’s own human “compiladores”, we are left to wonder nonetheless why Roa Bastos would fail to make explicit what is one of the most crucial connections between Cervantes’s novel and his own masterwork, especially given the importance not just of writing and dictation in *Yo el Supremo*, but of pens in particular.

About half way through Roa Bastos’s novel we learn something truly significant about Patiño’s pen. (And I will refer to this object—at least in this essay—as “Patiño’s pen” even though it originally belonged to El Supremo.) First, we learn that this fountain pen is an uncannily Borgesian object:

La parte inferior de la pluma termina en una chapa de metal manchada de tinta, de forma alveolada, acaparazonada. 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, por decirlo así, de

metáforas ópticas. Esta proyección se produce a través de orificios a lo largo del fuste de la pluma, que vierte chorro de imágenes como una microscópica cámara oscura. Un dispositivo interior, probablemente una combinación de espejos, hace que las imágenes se proyecten no invertidas sino en su posición normal en las entrelíneas ampliándolas y dotándolas de movimiento, al modo de lo que hoy conocemos como proyección cinematográfica. (214; original emphasis)

Second, we also learn that this pen and its “memory-lens” somehow came into Patiño’s possession upon the death of El Supremo, and that, after being passed down through five generations of Patiño’s progeny, this fabulous memory-lens was acquired (through somewhat dubious circumstances) by the Compilador himself.⁴

Thus, what really binds together all the textual fragments of *Yo el Supremo* is not the Compilador’s efforts as a compiler, annotator, and commentator (although all these offices are certainly important), but this fabulous pen itself. For, we know that it is with this very pen that El Supremo wrote both the “Circular perpetua” and the “Cuaderno privado”. (And we might even conjecture that Patiño occasionally used this pen to write down some of the words that El Supremo dictated to him over the course of their quixotic relationship.) Moreover, we can also infer that, having long coveted this fabulous pen and then having acquired it, the Compilador would hardly have failed to use it (or at least attempt to use it) to compile the very book we hold in our hands; which is to say, despite the Compilador’s caveat that the pen no longer works exactly the way it once did, much of *Yo el Supremo* flowed from the tip of this fabulous pen, including the various texts copied down by the Compilador as he prepared the manuscript for publication, from the original Supremo documents themselves—which means that the pen may have written some of this material twice—to the numerous secondary sources that the Compilador cites in his footnotes and meta-footnotes. Indeed, as Blanca Estela Ruiz Zaragoza argues, “el texto surge como el producto de un acto amoroso entre la pluma y la página en blanco” (n. p.). And because of this very intimate relationship between pen and paper, Patiño’s pen itself becomes, perhaps, the fourth most important character in the novel (after, of course, Francia, Patiño, and the Compilador themselves); for, Patiño’s pen is the only character in the novel whose complete autobiography flows (pun fully intended) in a linear fashion, and whose actual movement through time we can more or less chart using the text itself (even if there are, admittedly, several “chapters” missing from this autobiography). We know that the pen belonged to El Supremo. And we know that it passed into the hands of Patiño, after which it ultimately traveled down the generational line all the way to Patiño’s great-great-great grandson, Raimundo, who eventually “bequeathed” it to the Compilador himself just hours before his death.

In a way, Roa Bastos’s history of Patiño’s pen anticipates by more than two decades the secret life of the musical instrument at the heart of the 1998 film *The Red Violin*, directed by François Girard (and written by Girard and Don McKellar). Readers who have seen this film will recall that this red violin—whose paint is made from the blood of the violin maker’s deceased wife—functions as the central character within in the filmic narrative, as we watch the violin pass from owner to owner, and as we watch it move through both time and space from

⁴ Of this marvelous object, Verdesio argues that “the only way to accomplish what the dictator desires is to have recourse to a fictional instrument: a magic pen the character himself has created” (2010, 132).

seventeenth-century Italy to late-twentieth-century Montreal (passing through Austria, England, and China along the way); a narrative that unfolds as we also watch a series of flashbacks in which the wife of the violin maker has her fortune told by an old woman whose tarot cards predict that she will have a long life full of adventure and travel. Indeed, this red violin serves as a “witness” to many of the great historical upheavals of the last several centuries. But where the film traces the progression of this red violin only forward through time, *Yo el Supremo* provides us with a more complete history of the life of Patiño’s pen. In other words, once we realize that Patiño’s pen is a coetaneous object that was present both at the initial writing of *El Supremo*’s history and at its final compilation—especially if we re-examine Roa Bastos’s “misquote” from *Don Quixote* in his Premio Cervantes acceptance speech—some of the missing chapters of this autobiography actually come into view.

In the final paragraph of *Don Quixote*, Cide Hamete addresses his pen and then places in its “mouth” the response that Roa Bastos incorrectly remembered in his speech, a response that is immediately followed up by the pen’s own mockery of its archrival, Avellaneda’s “pluma de avestruz grosera” (II, 74, 592). The voice of Cide Hamete’s pen, however, quickly and seamlessly gives way to that of Cervantes himself when he says (through the ink that flows from his own pen), “pues no ha sido otro mi deseo que poner en aborrecimiento de los hombres las fingidas y disparatadas historias de los libros de caballerías, que por las de mi verdadero don Quijote van ya tropezando, y han de caer del todo, sin duda alguna” (II, 74, 593).

Having recently worked on the complex issue of time in *Don Quixote*, I am particularly attuned to the various intersecting timelines that all converge on the final page of Cervantes’s novel, timelines within which Cide Hamete’s pen is simultaneously present (Burningham). According to the timeline established by the book for Cide Hamete’s writing of his history of *Don Quixote*, this conversation between the Arab historian and his pen should have occurred—by my calculation—sometime between 1550 and 1575. According to the timeline established by the book for the narrator and the Morisco translator to compile both parts of *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*, the copying down of this conversation between Cide Hamete and his pen should have occurred—again by my calculation—sometime between 1580 and the first half of 1604 (given that the book was first published in early 1605). But for Cide Hamete’s pen to be able to mock Avellaneda’s “ostrich quill”, this pen must either be able to see into the future (which would make it a kind of inverted “memory-lens) or it must also be present at the time of the narrator’s compilation in 1614 (or perhaps even present within Cervantes’s own study in 1614, which would help explain why this pen’s words so seamlessly become those of Cervantes himself as they flow from whatever pen he uses to write this final paragraph). What I am driving at here is that—like Patiño’s pen, which is present at both the start and the finish of *Yo el Supremo*—Cide Hamete’s pen is also present at both the start and finish of *Don Quixote*, and thus could be said to be the one used by Cervantes to write the novel itself (at least within the meta-fictional frame established by the final chapter).

More importantly, Cide Hamete’s pen, like the musical instrument at the heart of *The Red Violin*, would seem to have had a number of previous owners before coming into view in the final pages of Cervantes’s masterwork. In an article entitled “The Supreme Pen (*Al-Qalam Al-A’la*) of Cide Hamete Benengeli in *Don Quixote*”, Luce López-Baralt connects the writing instrument evoked in Cervantes’s last chapter with the very foundation of Islam:

If we read the scene from the cultural coordinates of Islam —those with which Cervantes could have familiarized himself in his years of captivity in Algiers as well as in Spain— the prodigious pen that prepared the *Quixote* bears a close relationship to the “Supreme Pen” or *al-qalam al-a’la* of the Koran [...] (506)

Teasing out the numerous implications of this physical connection between Cide Hamete and the “cultural coordinates” of Islam, López-Baralt notes that “the Primordial Pen of God serves as an intermediary between the Supreme Creator and his ‘written’ creation” (511). Furthermore, following the lead of Julio Baena who has argued that Cide Hamete’s surname, Benengeli, uncannily sounds like “*Hijo de Angel*” (55), López-Baralt suggests that Cervantes’s Muslim historian is perhaps “an intermediary Pen-Angel suspended by an ordinary but resplendent wire between the Supreme Maker —Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra— and the story of Don Quijote de la Mancha” (513). For López-Baralt, this connection between Cervantes —through Cide Hamete and his Supreme Pen— and Arabic culture is important because it underpins Cervantes’s explicit retort to Avellaneda’s unauthorized appropriation of his title character: “Arabs express [the] inexorability of destiny as it is inscribed by the Pen on the Well-Preserved Tablet using the well-known phrase *maktub*, which means ‘it is written’” (508). In this way, she argues, when Cide Hamete’s pen rebukes Avellaneda’s hideous ostrich quill, “the wise historian Cide would thus seem to warn Avellaneda with an ominous *maktub*: the story of Don Quixote has remained written and no one should desecrate the bones of his tomb” (508).

Ellen Anderson, for her part, also examines the cultural background of Cide Hamete’s pen but interprets this object as a metaphor for the precarious and hybrid state of the *aljamiado* Moriscos of La Mancha at the time of the writing of part two of *Don Quixote*. Through her own analysis of the syntax of the final paragraph of Cervantes’s novel, Anderson notes:

Its grammatical subjects change abruptly but coherently, from the third person, referring to Cide Hamete, to the second person, as he addresses his pen, and to the first person, as the pen speaks for herself. So far, every single example of “yo” in this quotation refers either to Cide Hamete or to his synecdoche, his pen. The next sentence returns to the second person, whose antecedent is clearly the same quill pen just addressed by Cide Hamete as one of his own. However, this pen now has a mission, one which the speaker asserts is a Christian profession, rather like the office of a missionary priest, or, in the opinion of Don Quixote, that of a knight-errant. (406)

Throughout the remainder of her analysis Anderson examines the question of “conversion” — both voluntary and forced, both genuine and feigned— and attributes the final words of Cervantes’s last paragraph (i.e., “y yo quedaré satisfecho y ufano de haber sido el primero que gozó el fruto de sus escritos” [II, 74, 593]) not to Cervantes (as most readers tend to do) but to a culturally *aljamiado* Cide Hamete himself:

[If Cide Hamete] is a Morisco, he is Spanish, like Ana Félix and Ricote. As the text records, Ricote and Ana Félix speak Spanish; if they did not, Sancho Panza could not have understood them. And this is the final irony of Cide Hamete’s pen’s Christian profession. The manuscripts of the Moriscos, like Cide Hamete’s manuscript, were

written in “caracteres . . . arábigos” (I, 9: 14). Yet the language this Arabic calligraphy embodied was not Arabic: for knowledge of Arabic had virtually disappeared in the peninsula, and especially in La Mancha, by the second half of the sixteenth century [...]. (411)

For Anderson, then, this pen and its *aljamiado* owner become figures of Hapsburg Spain’s cultural intolerance and repression.

Returning to Cervantes himself (and setting aside for the moment Anderson’s thesis that this pen remains the property of Cide Hamete), we have no way of knowing just how this Supreme Pen may have passed into Cervantes’s own possession (much less how it may have come into the possession of Cide Hamete sometime before that). But we can reconstruct, I think, at least partially, what happened to this object after Cervantes’s death. Keeping in mind the simultaneity inherent in the conversation that occurs at the end of *Don Quixote* between Cide Hamete, his “talking pen”, and Cervantes, consider what the Compilador of *Yo el Supremo* has to say about the pre-history —and eventual transformation— of Patiño’s explicitly marvelous memory-lens:

Pienso que en otro tiempo la pluma debió también estar dotada de una tercera función: reproducir el espacio fónico de la escritura, el texto sonoro de la imágenes visuales; lo que podría haber sido el *tiempo hablado* de esas palabras sin formas, de esas formas sin palabras, que permitió a *El Supremo* conjugar los tres textos en una cuarta dimensión intemporal girando en torno al eje de un punto indiferenciado entre el origen y la abolición de la escritura; esa delgada sombra entre el mañana y la muerte. (214-15)

What I would like to suggest here, in short, is that somewhere within that slim and shadowy fourth-dimension that exists between “origin” and “abolition”, between “tomorrow” and “death”, Cide Hamete’s pen and Patiño’s pen are one and the same object.⁵

Of course, one could easily protest that the reading I am suggesting here is impossible, given that Cide Hamete’s pen is a quill while Patiño’s is a fountain pen, thereby making their oneness physically impossible. To this I can only respond as Don Quixote responded to the very well-reasoned argument that what he was calling Mambrino’s helmet was nothing more than a barber’s basin: “sea lo que fuere, que para mí que la conozco no hace al caso su trasmutación” (I, 21, 255); “y así, eso que a ti te parece [pluma estilográfica], me parece a mí [la pluma de Cide Hamete Benengeli], y a otro le parecerá otra cosa” (I, 25, 307). Indeed, if Cervantes’s world really does experience a kind of quixotic “continua mudanza” (I, 8, 130), if Roa Bastos’s *Supremo* is essentially “[una] entidad ya casi ectoplasmática” (1990a, 44), this writing instrument can easily be read as having transformed itself over the centuries from a quill pen into a fountain pen, while at the same time incorporating the new technologies of sound and image projection.

Still, if my reading of Patiño’s pen seems to go too far, I am more than happy to concede that I am ultimately reading the history of this object metaphorically; which is to say, within a novel that relies so heavily on “doubles”, “doppelgangers”, and “twins” (Pla 253; Serrano 902; and Recio Vela, 2007, 52), I read Patiño’s pen as visual metaphor in and of itself. And by

⁵ On *Yo el Supremo*’s many temporal and spatial frames, see Ferrer Agüero; and Pla.

reading Patiño's pen as a figure of Cide Hamete's, the fundamental significance of Roa Bastos's misquote of Cervantes comes into view. When Roa Bastos transforms the speaker of "Para mí sola nació don Quijote, y yo para él; él supo obrar y yo escribir" into Cide Hamete rather than his pen (II, 74, 592); and when he transforms this crucial sentence into "Sólo él pudo vivirlas, sólo yo pude escribirlas" (1990a, 52) —thus equating Don Quixote with his own quixotic Francia, while equating the writing of *Don Quixote* with the writing of *Yo el Supremo*— he succeeds in placing Cide Hamete's pen in his own hand (whether deliberately or inadvertently) just as Cervantes himself had done nearly four centuries earlier. Roa Bastos's misquote thus completes a figural chain of custody through which Cervantes's pen ultimately comes into his possession, just as Patiño's pen eventually becomes the property of the Compilador.⁶ In short, according to Roa Bastos, the secret life of Patiño's pen is really the autobiography of modern literature itself.

But there is still more to this figurative writing instrument than just literary history. *Yo el Supremo*'s exact year of publication, 1974, is significant for at least three historical and political reasons. First, the publication of *Yo el Supremo*, along with publication of Alejo Carpentier's *El recurso del método* (also published in 1974) and the soon-to-be-published *El otoño del patriarca* by Gabriel García Márquez in 1975, marked the clear emergence of the Latin American dictator novel as a recognized subgenre. To be sure, other Latin American novelists (particularly Miguel Ángel Asturias with *El señor Presidente* in 1946) had written on the topic of dictators before. But just as the "picaresque novel" did not arguably congeal as a critical concept until Mateo Alemán's 1599 *Guzmán de Alfarache* repeated many of the literary gestures established in 1554 by *Lazarillo de Tormes*, the Latin American dictator novel also depended on a repeat performance for its conceptual establishment. Thus, the near simultaneous publication of *Yo el Supremo*, *El recurso del método*, and *El otoño del patriarca* not only marked the codification of a literary genre but also set the stage for a number of politically charged, dictator-inflected texts that would appear in the coming years, from novels like García Márquez's *El general en su laberinto* (1989) to Roberto Bolaño's *Estrella distante* (1996) to Mario Vargas Llosa's *La fiesta del chivo* (2000); from films such as María Luisa Bemberg's *Camila* (1984) to Luis Puenzo's *La historia oficial* (1985) to Roman Polanski's *Death and the Maiden* (1994), which is based on Ariel Dorfman's 1990 play *La Muerte y la Doncella*.

Second, coming on the heels of the September 1973 *golpe de estado* that resulted in the death of Chilean President Salvador Allende (and the concomitant installation of Augusto Pinochet as supreme head of the Chilean state), *Yo el Supremo* emerged as perhaps a more immediate critique of Latin American dictatorship than Roa Bastos had initially intended it to be. Roa Bastos, of course, wrote *Yo el Supremo* with Alfredo Stroessner in mind, whose then-two decades as President of Paraguay (beginning in 1954) was commemorated during the very year of the novel's publication and whose rise to power following the Paraguayan Civil War of 1947 was ultimately responsible for Roa Basto's long exile in Argentina. Still, given the then-recent events in Chile, initial readers of *Yo el Supremo* in 1974 perhaps could not help but associate Roa Basto's Francia with Pinochet as yet one more in a long line of Latin American *caudillos*. And thus, despite the hope that the Allende presidency had created (at least among those on the left) that the political tide was turning away from *caudillaje* and toward democracy, the publication of

⁶ Indeed, Rafael Recio Vela reiterates the notion that a number of Latin American writers, but particularly Roa Bastos, "take up" ("retomar") Cervantes's pen in order to give new life and new opportunities to Cervantes's quixotic utopia (2005-2006, n. p.)

Yo el Supremo coincided with a setback in Latin American democratization that would endure at least until 1990 when Pinochet stepped down as President of Chile (while nevertheless retaining his status as Commander-in-Chief of the Chilean Army for another eight years). Stroessner, of course, was overthrown by Andrés Rodríguez in yet another *golpe de estado* in February 1989—a military coup that nonetheless set in motion a series of events that would ultimately lead to Paraguay’s own democratization.⁷

Third, and most importantly (at least for this essay), the 1974 publication of *Yo el Supremo* coincided with the clear decline in both health and influence of Spain’s own Francisco Franco—whose name, coincidentally echoed that of Francia—after nearly four decades as Spain’s “Generalísimo”. Like Stroessner, Franco had come to power through civil war; like Stroessner, Franco controlled his country with an iron fist; and like Stroessner, Franco could trace his *caudillo* lineage to a much earlier point in the history of Spain and Latin America.⁸ If Roa Basto’s purpose in *Yo el Supremo* is to draw our attention to the origins of Latin American dictatorship through his focus on Francia, his dictator novel also demonstrates that the origins of *caudillaje* go back much farther than 1814 when Francia consolidated his complete control of Paraguay. As González Echevarría remarks:

The dictator, Primer Magistrado, Comandante en Jefe, Supremo, El Hombre, is a paternal figure who in turn embodies yet another figure, the *macho*. In this sense, then, the dictator becomes, in literature, a figure as complex and, if one wants, abstract as Don Juan, and perhaps just as original and philosophically rich. In the Hispanic tradition and guided by purely literary sources, it is easy to see that the figure goes back to the Arabic presence in medieval Spain. As Américo Castro has so persuasively shown, El Cid, “El Señor” in Spanish, was a mirror image of his Arabic counterparts in the peninsula, thus his Arabic name. (1985, 66; original emphasis)⁹

But this brings us back precisely to Cide Hamete Benegeli and his Supreme Pen.

Henry Kamen begins his recent book, *Imagining Spain*, with a sentence that echoes William Faulkner’s well-known line, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (92). Says Kamen: “One of the most extraordinary aspects of Spain’s sixteenth century is that many Spaniards are still living in it. In a sense, they have never left it” (ix). From this Faulknerian

⁷ Helen Weldt-Basson points out that, following the Argentine military junta’s own *golpe de estado* in 1976, Roa Bastos perhaps “narrowly escaped becoming one of the country’s many ‘disappeared’ political activists and intellectuals”: “*I the Supreme* had been placed on Argentina’s list of prohibited books, and shortly after the author’s departure for France [to take a teaching position at the University of Toulouse], Roa Bastos’s apartment was ransacked by the Argentine government” (2010, 3).

⁸ Commenting on the connection between Stroessner and Francia, Rui Veiga points out: “Em muito de suas ações estratégicas, no plano interno paraguaio, copiou atos de Francia, chegando mesmo a se colocar como ditador perpétuo e supremo mandatário do país. Igualmente ao que fizera El Supremo empreendeu uma política coercitiva no plano institucional; instaurou a tutela militar no poder político; prendeu, deportou e assassinou opositores; cerceou de forma totalitária as liberdades democráticas e exilou um sem número de intelectuais, artistas e escritores” (147).

⁹ Gabrielle Le Tallec-Lloret also connects El Supremo to the culture of medieval Iberia, but through the figure of Patiño rather than through Francia: “El dictador queda, pues, estrechamente vinculado con su transcriptor. La relación con la Edad Media vuelve a aparecer aquí. En efecto, en la Edad Media, la figura del autor es indisoluble de la actividad de copista” (n. p.)

point of departure, Kamen examines a number of Spanish myths (of the “historic nation”, of a “Christian Spain”, of a “universal language”, etc.) and argues that “the early modern period [...] continues to occupy a central role in myth-making because it supplies material for new conflictive attitudes in a country which has not yet achieved a stable national identity” (208). Kamen also notes that the only time in Spanish history when “this hold of the mythical past on the imagination was broken decisively” was during the Second Republic and that, with the coming of the Civil War, “Franco’s victory assured the triumph of the most radical traditionalism, which became the official cultural doctrine of the state” (207). Indeed, as Juan Pablo Fusi has also recently remarked, “[E]l franquismo quiso heredar y continuar el pasado imperial: el Siglo de Oro, la arquitectura del Escorial, los imagineros castellanos, la poesía neoclásica del Renacimiento, la espiritualidad de los místicos españoles. Revalorizó el pensamiento tradicional católico [...]; se distanció de todo vanguardismo estético y favoreció un retorno a las formas culturales más ‘establecidas’” (103). And central to this Golden Age “establishment” culture, of course, is Cervantes and Don Quixote, particularly “a Quixote who will defend Spain by force if necessary” (Kamen 34).¹⁰

Thus, when Roa Bastos rhetorically links his Francia and Patiño to Don Quixote and Sancho, he is tapping into an authoritarian *quijotismo* that lies at the heart not just of Stroessner’s Paraguayan dictatorship, but also of Franco’s dictatorial project to combat all that he believed threatened to destroy “traditional” Spain. As Loggie remarks, “El Supremo continually presents himself as the mythic hero —as Moses, Christ, or the dragon-slayer” (83). Or, as Roa Bastos himself indicated in his Premio Cervantes acceptance speech: “El núcleo generador de mi novela, en relación con el *Quijote*, fue la de imaginar un *doblo* del Caballero de la Triste Figura cervantino y metamorfosearlo en el Caballero Andante de lo Absoluto; es decir, un Caballero de la Triste Figura que creyese, alucinadamente, en la escritura del poder y en el poder de la escritura” (1990a, 43; original emphasis).

But because *Yo el Supremo* (like *Don Quixote* before it) is such a richly ambiguous text, Roa Bastos’s linkage not just of El Supremo to Don Quixote but also of Patiño to Cide Hamete and of the Compilador to Cervantes’s so-called second author deliberately complicates the novel in ways that go beyond a critique of the dictatorial powers of José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia (or even beyond their comparison with the dictatorial powers of Alfredo Stroessner). Roa Bastos’s Cervantine rhetoric serves to undermine the very “power of writing” that he glosses above through the same kinds of discursive mechanisms that Cervantes himself employs to call into question the sanity of Don Quixote’s mission to restore the golden age of chivalry as well as the authority of the very narrative text in which this quixotic project is interrogated. Where Cervantes’s text remarks, “Llegando a escribir el traductor desta historia este quinto capítulo, dice que le tiene por apócrifo” (II, 5, 73), Roa Bastos’s Compilador, speaking of a letter that Francia had received from Simón Bolívar, inserts the following footnote: “El Supremo Dictador, efectivamente, no contestó esta carta de Bolívar. La respuesta que algunos historiadores-

¹⁰ Nevertheless, as Paul Preston and Hernán Vidal point out, *Don Quixote* was also useful in support of other political perspectives. Speaking of Salvador de Madariaga, Preston notes that Madariaga’s “identification with both Don Quixote and Sancho Panza was total. In the 1920s, his favourite pseudonym was Sancho Quijano, a clear indication of his desire to unite the empirical good sense of Sancho Panza with the idealism of Don Quixote” (142). Vidal, for his part, examines the way in which Don Quixote functioned as a spiritual touchstone for a whole generation of exiled intellectuals who, he argues, were “políticamente moderados, liberales, y socialdemócratas, antifranquistas” (93). See also Varela Olea.

novelistas recogen es apócrifa” (323). Where Cervantes’s text suggests that Cide Hamete cannot be trusted as a historian given that he an “autor árábigo, siendo muy propio de los de aquella nación ser mentirosos” (I, 9, 144), Roa Bastos’s text frequently refers to Patiño as El Supremo’s “fide-indigno” (64). Thus for a text whose core rhetorical move is a pun involving “dictation” and “dictatorship”, such discursive ambiguity in the former necessarily undermines the authority of the latter.

William Childers has called Cide Hamete “the Other within”, a symbol of what he also characterizes as the “internal colonialism” that developed within the Iberian Peninsula in the wake of the final phases of the *Reconquista* (68). For Childers, Cide Hamete represents “the transition from *mudejar* to Morisco, which is to say, from autonomous religious minority to internal colony” (76). As such, Cide Hamete personifies the human collateral damage that accompanied Castilla’s unremitting march first from north to south and then from east to west across the Atlantic and beyond. And in this regard, Patiño truly is Cide Hamete’s doppelgänger. For, where Cide Hamete is a symbol of the cultural hybridity that developed during medieval Iberia’s so-called *convivencia* (a cultural hybridity that was decidedly and officially unwelcome after 1492), Patiño is a figure of the cultural hybridity that emerged in the wake of three hundred years of European conquest in the Americas.¹¹ As Thomas Phillips observes: “[U]ntil recent reforms in Bolivia, Paraguay was the only officially bilingual state in the Americas. Some 95 per cent of Paraguay’s population speaks Guaraní, while only 50 per cent speak Spanish” (697). If Cide Hamete evokes a residual Arabic and Muslim culture already besieged by Hapsburg imperialism at the time of the foundation of modern Spain, Patiño evokes the simultaneous marginalization *and* assimilation of Guaraní culture at the highest levels of Paraguay’s government at the very moment of its own independence. And in this regard, Patiño functions as a symbol of Amerindian subjugation by a European master intent on imposing notions of progress and enlightenment on New World populations.¹² As Adriana Bergero argues, “desde la llegada de las huestes conquistadoras [...] el discurso de las instituciones fue escrito en castellano y producido por un emisor europeizante, blanco, católico, oficial, culto y minoritario; dicho discurso hegemónico prevaleció sobre el habla subalterna; guaraní, mestizo, marginal, oral, analfabeto, mayoritario pero censurado” (17-18).¹³

Of course, in saying this, I readily acknowledge that such a comparison between Cide Hamete and Patiño is not a perfect analogy, that there is not a one-to-one correspondence between Cide Hamete’s Morisco background and Patiño’s mestizo (Guaraní) heritage. For, given the importance of *Yo el Supremo*’s numerous “doubling” gestures, Patiño functions as both Sancho Panza and Cide Hamete; which is to say, he is both *cristiano viejo* and Morisco, both European and Amerindian at one and the same time.¹⁴ Such an acknowledgement is important because, within the interplay of orality and writing so crucial to both texts, it is Francia (rather than Sancho) who represents indigenous orality in *Yo el Supremo*, with Patiño (rather than Don

¹¹ On the relationship between the geopolitics of the Spanish Hapsburgs and *Don Quixote*, see Vidal (3-8). On the figure of Cide Hamete within the ideology of these imperial geopolitics, see Wilson.

¹² On the genocide committed against the Guaraní by the governments of Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay during the War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1870), see Veiga (153).

¹³ Verdesio insists that “writing was [...] the foundation upon which European domination of the lands and peoples of the new territories was based. [...] [M]anifestations of the oral traditions of indigenous peoples were particularly repressed by colonial authorities” (2010, 133).

¹⁴ On Paraguayan bilingualism and hybridity, see Barrera López; and Kushigan.

Quixote) representing European writing. More importantly, however, especially within the cultural context of a Latin American country whose population to this day is overwhelmingly bilingual, reading either *El Supremo* or Patiño as predominantly Guaraní or predominantly European is simply untenable. Indeed, as Blas Matamoro sardonically remarks, Paraguay “[es] el único país bárbaro del subcontinente que no intentaba disimular su barbarie, proclamándose civilizado, como los demás, sino que la mostraba en todo su dudoso y polvoriento esplendor” (53). Thus, where the early modern Reyes Católicos, Fernando and Isabel, may very well have hoped to establish on the Iberian Peninsula “one nation, one religion, and one language”, neither Francia nor Patiño (nor Roa Bastos, for that matter) seem very interested in eradicating Guaraní culture as part of Paraguay’s establishment as a modern, independent nation. On the contrary, as Javier Uriarte points out, by using the term “Karaí-Guasú”, Roa Bastos’s *Supremo* self-consciously ties himself to Paraguay’s pre-Colombian Guaraní culture by appropriating “the indigenous discourse in order to legitimize himself” (161).

But in this, one of the great ironies associated with the publication and reception of *Yo el Supremo* emerges. In his 1989 Premio Cervantes acceptance speech, Roa Bastos made the following statement:

La España democrática trabaja lealmente, fraternalmente, contribuyendo de una manera considerable a la restitución de este equilibrio en la coexistencia y coparticipación de nuestros países de ambos lados del Atlántico en un mecanismo, desde luego perfectible, de integración sistemática y progresiva en todos los planos. El sistema de cooperación con América que España ha iniciado hace ya muchos años es un ejemplo activo de ello. (1990a, 41)

Of course, in 1974 at the moment of the publication of *Yo el Supremo*, Spain was anything but a beacon of democracy. Franco —whose own decades-long ideology regarding state, religion, and language deliberately mirrored that of the Reyes Católicos nearly five centuries earlier— had been planning for a future in which his hand-picked successor, King Juan Carlos, would continue many of his Falangist policies. By April of 1990, however, when this same King Juan Carlos presented Roa Bastos with the Premio Cervantes, both Spain and Paraguay had shed their respective dictators and were in the process of transitioning into what Roa Bastos called “la integración iberoamericana y peninsular en una comunidad orgánica de naciones libres” (1990a, 41).

But this brings us back once again to Patiño’s pen. Like the musical instrument at the heart of *The Red Violin*, Patiño’s Supreme Pen is a witness to several centuries of Iberian and Latin American history. Per López-Baralt, this Supreme Pen was there at the founding of Islam. Then, having crossed the Strait of Gibraltar, it was there still in Al-Andalus, maybe even resting gently at some point on the writing desk of Averroes. It was certainly there in Hapsburg Toledo —perhaps having arrived in this storied, multicultural city many years earlier in order to participate in Alfonso X el Sabio’s famous Escuela de Traductores— when an *aljamiado* historian named Cide Hamete Benengeli penned the history of Iberia’s most renowned knight-errant. Again, we do not quite know what happened to this Supreme Pen during the next two centuries (i.e., from the early 1600s to the early 1800s), but at some point, like so many other Iberian adventurers before it, this Supreme Pen seems to have crossed the Atlantic and arrived in

the New World, where it was present at the founding of the newly independent nation of Paraguay in 1811, and where—first in the hands of Francia, and later in the possession of his amanuensis, Patiño—it wrote many of the founding documents of Latin America’s first independent nation. Moreover, having participated in the Francia dictatorship, it was there again in 1954 (still in the possession of a Patiño) when Alfredo Stroessner came to power. And finally, it was there again a few years later when Roa Bastos’s unnamed *Compilador*, having acquired this marvelous writing instrument from the last of the Patiño line, finally gathered and commented on the numerous documents that make up *Yo el Supremo*.

Patiño’s pen is therefore much more than just a *witness* to history. Having been there all along, it simultaneously performs, represents, and records a centuries-long chronicle of Iberian and Latin American conquest, Reconquest, empire, colonization, and dictatorship that all too often plays itself out as a series of cyclical and repetitive gestures. For Fernando de Toro, such an ongoing performance articulates a very Borgesian aesthetic in which “lectura, re-escritura, palimpsesto, rizoma, [y] intertextualidad” all combine (26); for Krynski, this non-linear chronicle constitutes a “compilación de compilaciones” (273). And within this non-linear performance, Patiño’s pen functions simultaneously as both subject and object, existing within a multi-temporal frame that ultimately incorporates Roa Bastos’s publication of *Yo el Supremo* at the height of the Stroessner dictatorship. If López-Baralt is right when she says that the culminating discursive act of this Supreme Pen is to issue an “ominous *maktub*” to Avellaneda on the very last page of Cervantes’s novel, indicating to this pseudonymous, shadowy imposter that Don Quixote’s destiny is always already written (“As it is written so shall it come to pass” [López-Baralt 508]); then perhaps the pasquinade that appears on the very first page of *Yo el Supremo* can be read as a repeat performance of this Cervantine *maktub* by the very same pen. For Roa Bastos, the ultimate destiny of his quixotic “Caballero-Andante de lo Absoluto” is just as unavoidable as Alonso Quijano’s (1990a, 43): “[El Supremo] resultó más fuerte que la muerte, porque ya estaba muerto sin saber que lo estaba” (Roa Bastos, 1990a, 45). Indeed, following Francia’s death in 1840, his remains were ignominiously disinterred and scattered in much the same way as predicted in *Yo el Supremo*’s fictional pasquinade (Tovar Blanco 255-59).

Still, while it is certainly tempting to read Patiño’s pen as the ultimate author of this anonymous and prophetic pasquinade (a reading within which the pen itself becomes a kind of double-agent working both for and against El Supremo), such a reading is far too literal even for a work as phantasmagorical as *Yo el Supremo*. In the end, of course, Patiño’s pen is simply a metaphor for the power of writing. And, as such, this pen is really just an extension of Roa Bastos himself, whose evocation of Cervantes and *Don Quixote* at the height of Stroessner’s power—at a time when dictatorship seemed to be clearly entrenched, if not on the rise, all across the Western hemisphere—serves to remind us of the power of Cervantine ambiguity to undermine authority and instill clarity:

En este caleidoscopio colectivo [i.e., *Don Quixote*] don Miguel supo mirar las cosas del revés: desde el presente hacia el pasado y desde el futuro hacia el presente, en esos espejos del tiempo, de la memoria y de la premonición que se comunican sus imágenes en la *Imago* del mundo. Sabiduría que hizo decir a su coetáneo Gracián: “Sólo mirándolos del revés se ven bien las cosas de este mundo”. (1990a, 49)

In short, Patiño's pen is just such a kaleidoscope for Roa Bastos. It is a memory-lens whose optical metaphors allow us a glimpse into the inner workings of dictatorship, while at the same time providing a clear view of its recurrent self-delusions, self-doubts, and eventual self-destruction.

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