
An Absent Author?

Myth in Augusto Roa Bastos's *Yo el Supremo*

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Abstract

This article examines the presence of indigenous myths in *Yo el Supremo* (1974) by the Paraguayan novelist Augusto Roa Bastos. It identifies a number of key indigenous myths in the novel and analyses how they are represented in relation to other intertexts which have traditionally been regarded as more prestigious. It also considers how they undermine the power of *el Supremo*, the dictator who is the novel's protagonist. This is achieved by using Roa Bastos's concept of the *texto ausente* to consider how the mythic intertexts are both absent and powerful.

Resumen

Este artículo examina la presencia de mitos indígenas en *Yo el Supremo* (1974) del escritor paraguayo Augusto Roa Bastos. Identifica varios mitos indígenas clave en la novela y analiza cómo están representados en relación con otros intertextos que tradicionalmente han sido considerados más prestigiosos. También considera cómo minan el poder de *El Supremo*, el dictador protagonista de la novela. Esto se logra a través del uso del concepto del *texto ausente* de Roa Bastos para considerar cómo los intertextos míticos son a la vez ausentes y poderosos.

The repeated encounters of different cultures has played a vital role in shaping the many societies of modern-day Latin America, and was one of the key interests of the Paraguayan author Augusto Roa Bastos. Throughout his career, Roa Bastos attempted different ways of representing his homelands' unique culture, while using his works to oppose the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner, who ruled Paraguay from 1954 until 1989. Roa Bastos's most famous work is his 1974 novel *Yo el Supremo*, a fictionalised account of the life of the nineteenth-century dictator José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia.

Before the arrival of Europeans, the area that would become present-day Paraguay was inhabited by a variety of peoples. The east was largely inhabited by members of the Tupí-Guaraní, whose area of influence extended from along the Brazilian coast from the mouth of the Amazon as far south as Rio Grande do Sul, and as far west as the banks of the Rivers Paraná, Paraguay and Uruguay.

The Tupí-Guaraní were largely semi-sedentary peoples who lived by farming and hunting. The arid Chaco in the west of Paraguay was home to a number of other cultures such as the Nivaklé and Lengua. These cultures were largely nomadic hunter-gatherers, the difficult conditions of the Chaco being unsuited to agriculture. as well as these two families, there were also a number of other cultures. Chase Sardi (1978: 22) groups Paraguay's indigenous peoples into five major linguistic divisions: Zamuko; Maskoy; Matakó; Guaykuru; and Tupí-Guaraní. Of these the Guaraní were the most numerous and have had the greatest influence on the culture of present-day Paraguay. as is discussed below, Guaraní is the most widely spoken language in Paraguay and has had a great influence on the national culture, but there are also still a number of Guaraní groups who maintain pre-Hispanic ways of life, such as the Mbyá and the Guayaki.

After the first European travellers reached Paraguay in the early sixteenth century, the fate of these different groups varied widely. in the early colonial period Paraguay's isolation and lack of economically viable natural resources ensured that there was little European settlement and so little contact between the peoples of the region and Europeans. However, as the numbers of Europeans in Latin America increased, more of them started to enter Paraguay. many indigenous peoples resisted contact, maintaining their traditional way of life, thus starting a long process of decline as the modern world encroached on their territories. as a result, many of them are now facing the end of their culture, a process which Roa Bastos describes as the 'vieja tragedia de esclavitud, degradación y exterminio, que culmina en la actualidad con la inmolación de de las últimas comunidades' (1978b: 11).¹

many of the Guaraní entered into close relations with European settlers. However, slaving raids from the *bandeirantes* of São Paulo took their toll on those living in the jungles of Eastern Paraguay. It was during this period that the famous Jesuit missions were established, but the expulsion of the Jesuits from Latin America in 1767 left the Guaraní unprotected, especially as part of this area was handed over to the Portuguese Empire. once Spanish colonisation of Paraguay was established there was considerable contact between the Guaraní and the Spanish colonists. often this was in the form of sexual relations between Spanish men and Guaraní women. as Edwin Williamson observes: 'Paraguay came to be known as "the Paradise of Muhammad", for Spaniards there lived openly with large numbers of women. a cleric reported [...] that the Spaniards of Paraguay often had up to seventy native concubines and rarely fewer than five or six' (1992: 83). This close contact meant that Paraguay developed a distinctive hybrid culture, strongly influenced by indigenous practices and beliefs in which the Guaraní language almost came to supplant Spanish. Egon Schaden

1 This tragic process is described in Pierre Clastres' *Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians*, in which the French anthropologist recounts his visits to the Guayaki on a number of occasions and his observations of the process of acculturation over a period of several years (first published in 1972 as *Chronique des indiens Guayaki*; see translation by Paul Auster (Clastres 1998)).

observes that throughout the former areas of Guaraní domination: 'se sabe que la cultura Guaraní y su substrato biológico están profundamente representados en la población mestiza, principalmente en el Paraguay, habiendo dado origen allí a una cultura híbrida iberoindígena sui géneris, [...] variando entre formas casi tribales y rurales, por un lado, y culturas urbanas de acentuado carácter civilizador por el otro' (1998: 28).

The situation Schaden describes can be analysed using the concept of transculturation devised by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando ortiz, who coined the term to describe the process by which a dominated culture adopts elements of a dominant culture, modifying both to create a new culture. ortiz coined the term 'transculturation' in preference to the word 'acculturation' which was favoured in Anglo-US anthropological circles of the time, as he believed that this concentrated too much on the loss of the original culture and did not give dominated groups sufficient recognition for their cultural resistance and for the creative powers they bring to the resulting new culture (1995: 97). ortiz saw transculturation as a process in which a group first passes through partial deculturation before entering a stage where new cultural phenomena are created, a stage he calls 'neoculturation' (2002: 102–103). This process is similar to Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridisation. as Bhabha explains:

Colonial hybridity is not a *problem* of genealogy or identity between two *different* cultures which can then be resolved as an issue of cultural relativism. Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority. (2008: 162)

Indeed, this process by which the 'denied' knowledge – or *texto ausente* – of indigenous myth undermines the basis of colonial authority is one of the key themes of *Yo el Supremo*.

The most obvious manifestation of this hybridity is the prevalence of the Guaraní language over Spanish. indeed, until 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.² Nonetheless, the Guaraní spoken by the majority of the population is heavily influenced by Spanish. As Roa Bastos observes: 'La lucha de más de cuatro siglos entre estos dos universos lingüísticos en contacto ha producido entre ellos un fenómeno de mutua invasión, no sólo lexical sino también sintáctica y semántica. Esta interpenetración erosiva [...] ha producido el fenómeno [...] de la castellanización del guaraní y la guaranización del castellano' (1984: p. 5).

it is important to note that the hybrid *ibero-indígena* culture to which Schaden refers is not the same as the indigenous cultures that survive to this day in Paraguay. Roa Bastos describes them as the *sociedad indígena* and *sociedad nacional* (1987a: 107). The *sociedad nacional* is not an indigenous culture, even if it is influenced by indigenous beliefs, but is instead a *campesino* culture lived in

2 See Dooley 2003: 115.

the medium of Guaraní. Roa Bastos reflects on the relationship of antagonism between the two cultures, noting that: 'Para el indio guaraní, para el indígena en general, el *enemigo* por antonomasia es el paraguayo, puesto que este criollo o mestizo, descendiente por línea paterna del conquistador y colonizador blanco continúa siendo el dispensador de todos sus infortunios y humillaciones' (107).

Nevertheless, this *cultura nacional* is the end result of a long process of transculturation and is strongly influenced by pre-Hispanic beliefs; elements of pre-Hispanic myth survive in its beliefs and way of life. Consequently, Paraguay displays a rather paradoxical situation: on the one hand, we find perhaps the most thorough example of a hybrid culture combining Hispanic and indigenous traditions along with an indigenous language that has almost replaced Spanish, while at the same time this hybrid culture pushes out other indigenous cultures. This hybrid culture provides special challenges for the Paraguayan author, many of which relate to the question of language. Roa Bastos himself wrote:

En la literatura de este país, las particularidades de su cultura bilingüe, única en su especie en América Latina, constriñe a los escritores paraguayos, en el momento de escribir en castellano, a oír los sonidos de un discurso informulado aún, pero presente ya en la vertiente emocional y mítica del guaraní. Este discurso, este texto no escrito, subyace en el universo lingüístico bivalente hispano-guaraní, escindido entre la escritura y la oralidad. Es un texto en que el escritor no piensa, pero que lo piensa a él. así, esta presencia lingüística del guaraní se impone desde la interioridad misma del mundo efectivo de los paraguayos. (1993: 31)

as an author from a bilingual culture, Roa Bastos must choose between languages when writing. as the Paraguayan intellectual and author Rubén Bareiro Saguier states: 'Roa Bastos escribe en español. Pero con la lucidez que le otorga la posesión o mejor el ser poseído por la lengua autóctona, sabe que no puede escapar al universo cultural del guaraní, que es como la materia placentaria en que está inmerso el paraguayo' (1990: 68). Whichever language he chooses, he will unavoidably sacrifice something. This element that always escapes the author's attempts to trap it in writing is something that Roa Bastos referred to as the 'absent text'. as he stated in an essay entitled 'El texto ausente':

De aquel fulgor primitivo de los mitos originales solo han quedado los vestigios de un texto rebelde a su inscripción en un sistema de signos lingüísticos, extraño a la cosmovisión y a la sensibilidad de la cultura indígena. Por tanto, en el cotexto de la cultura mestiza, pero sobre todo en la lengua dominante del colonizador el habla oral produce un texto ausente; un texto ausente que se volatiliza y desaparece en el pasaje a la escritura. (1999: 11–12)

The *texto ausente* is the space between the Spanish text and the effaced Guaraní elements of the hybrid culture, rather than the Guaraní elements themselves, an example of what Bhabha refers to as 'the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion' (2008: 2). it is a liminal space between the hybrid culture and its representation. The *texto ausente* consists not only of the Guaraní language but also of other elements of this hybrid culture

such as its world view and its myths. This text is unavoidably absent: by fixing it in writing the author inevitably changes it into something it is not, and so must find a way of making it into an absent presence, thus transporting the reader to the space between cultures. Martin Lienhard refers to Roa Bastos's writing as 'un metódico trabajo que consiste en dar forma, cuerpo y nombre a lo dicho o indecible, en movilizar, por medio de la decantación y de la puesta en perspectiva, los significados derruidos u olvidados' (1993: 54). This is true but it is important to consider the problems the author faces in trying to say the unsayable.

In *Yo el Supremo* this *texto ausente* is found both in the novel's form and its content. However, it is not immediately obvious. This novel is centred on a character known as El Supremo who has ruled Paraguay as dictator for 26 years. However, his power is waning and the novel opens with a reproduction of a *pasquín* that has been found nailed to the door of Asunción Cathedral. El Supremo orders a hunt for the authors of the *pasquín* and also starts to dictate a *circular perpetua* to be distributed to all the civil servants of Paraguay in which he narrates the history of Paraguay in an attempt to justify his dictatorship and refute the accusations of his enemies. From early on in the novel it is apparent that El Supremo is dead and that he is narrating from beyond the grave. The majority of the novel consists of El Supremo's voice as he dictates the circular to his *fiel de fechos*, Policarpo Patiño, talks with Patiño and writes in his diary. Nonetheless, despite El Supremo's apparent control of the text it is strongly polyphonic, as a number of other voices make themselves heard through the novel's use of intertextuality. These voices include historians, other novelists, travel writers, contemporary accounts of his rule and a variety of myths, including indigenous ones. As the novel progresses El Supremo's mastery of language starts to escape him and he begins to suffer from various forms of aphasia until at the end he loses the ability to speak and an anonymous voice describes his corpse decaying.

The character of El Supremo is based on the nineteenth-century dictator Dr Francia, who ruled Paraguay from 1814 until his death in 1840. Francia was born in Yaguaron in 1766 and travelled to the University of Córdoba as a teenager to study law and theology. He did not become a priest but instead returned to Paraguay, becoming a lawyer. After a dissolute youth, he played a prominent role in Paraguay's declaration of independence in 1811 and then manoeuvred his way into power, first ruling jointly with Fulgencio Yegros and, then, from 1814, ruling as dictator until his death in 1840. Francia was widely condemned as a despot during his life and his rule is still the subject of some controversy. He set out to break the power of the *veinte familias*, the Creole elite that dominated Paraguayan politics and public life, and among other measures banned all-white marriages. He also imprisoned many of his enemies in appalling conditions. After discovering a planned uprising in 1821, he had all the Spaniards in Paraguay arrested and some sixty conspirators were executed on his orders. Francia's enemies were often questioned under torture in the *cámara de la verdad*. Contemporary accounts describe Francia's control over every aspect of

the country, down to ordering clothes for conscripts and decreeing when crops should be planted. Francia had always been paranoid, but as his rule progressed this trait became increasingly marked and he started to sleep in a different bed every night. Despite – or perhaps because of – these excesses Francia maintained order in Paraguay at a time when its neighbours were descending into chaos and was regarded as something of a defender of the poor. El Supremo is never explicitly identified with Francia: instead the likeness is created through the use of historical intertexts and references to his contemporaries, as well as extracts – both real and fictional – from their accounts of Francia. Lienhard identifies this character as an example of the figure of the *karaí*, a prophet who would lead people on great pilgrimages to try to locate the *Tierra-sin-mal*, the Guaraní Paradise which they believed was located on the Earth and so could be found by walking towards the east. Lienhard observes that el Supremo: ‘reúne, bastante irónicamente, los rasgos típicos de los profetas antiguos. [...] Pero el discurso novelesco acaba por desconstruir y desmitificar, a través del personaje de Francia, el complejo profético’ (1991: 60). Lienhard identifies el Supremo with the Jesuit priest Antonio Ruíz de Montoya (1585–1652). However, it is perhaps more interesting to consider that el Supremo represents multiple figures: not just Montoya but also Francia and indeed many others.

indeed, *Yo el Supremo* is a challenging and innovative text based on a great variety of intertextual references, including a wide range of myths. as Sibylle M. Fisher observes:

hay una presencia indígena cuasi-dialógica en los discursos del Supremo Dictador, quien se sirve de ciertos mitos paraguayos para sus propios fines. Es una presencia precaria, más murmullo que voz plena, en la que el sujeto indígena del discurso está ausente. [...] La voz americana se articula en gran parte a través de la voz del Supremo. (1991: 95)

Nonetheless, this indigenous presence is often obscured by the greater presence of intertexts that are traditionally regarded as more prestigious, such as historical documents and the accounts of European travellers and myths that are regarded as universal. The presence of these other intertexts helps to drown out the indigenous presence in the novel, a presence which, in Fischer’s words, is precarious. While it is largely mediated by el Supremo, as Fischer observes, it escapes his control and so undermines his discourse, even while he tries to use it as a support.

an important part of the *texto ausente* is to be found in the language of the novel. Bareiro Saguier has written at length on the methods used by Roa Bastos to reflect the Guaraní language in his writing. He observes that: ‘es posible detectar en la narrativa de Roa Bastos páginas enteras en que un guaraní-hablante cree reconocer una prosa escrita no sólo en el “sentido”, con la “emoción vital” de la lengua aborigen, sino inclusive con las “características formales del guaraní”’ (1990: 152).

These ‘características formales’ include: use of Guaraní expressions without explanatory footnotes or a glossary; semantic tactics in order to create a ‘Guaraní

rhythm' such as a lack of causal prepositions and conjunctions; and lexical tactics that echo Guaraní's agglutinative nature such as the use of diminutive suffixes, discourse makers and word play (Bareiro Saguier 1990: 152–60). However, despite his valuable work in identifying these features, Bareiro Saguier does not ask how much of Roa Bastos's textual strategy can be appreciated by a reader who does not speak Guaraní. Even if Guaraní is made present in the novel in this way it is still absent for the majority of readers or present only as a kind of *ostranenie* in the novel's language. indeed, apart from these Guaraní elements, the language of *Yo el Supremo* is highly poetic. The relationship between language and power in *Yo el Supremo* is also of key importance. This multi-voicing introduces an element of ambiguity into the language of *el Supremo*, thus undermining his attempts to impose his will on Paraguay.

one of the most important references to myth is *el Supremo*'s use of the archetype of the creation myth. Throughout the novel, but especially in the sections titled '*Circular Perpetua*', *el Supremo* recounts the foundation of Paraguay, depicting himself as a father-figure. In the first instalment of the '*Circular Perpetua*' he writes: 'como Gobernante Supremo también soy vuestro padre natural. Vuestro amigo. Vuestro compañero. Como quien sabe todo lo que hay que saber y más, les iré instruyendo sobre lo que deben hacer para seguir adelante. Con órdenes sí, mas también con los conocimientos que les faltan sobre el origen, sobre el destino de nuestra Nación' (Roa Bastos 1987b: 127).

He envisages the '*Circular Perpetua*' as an almost sacred text, one that instructs its readers about the origins of Paraguay, provides moral guidance and makes prophecies about the future, all the time reminding the reader that *el Supremo* is the creator. *El Supremo* also positions himself as the protector of Paraguay, writing: 'la Hidra del Plata es precisamente la única que sigue insistiendo en su afán de apropiarse del Paraguay' (185). The trope of defeating sea creatures is one that appears in the Babylonian creation myth where Marduk defeats Tiamat, the mother-goddess and sea creature, and makes the universe out of her body. However, while *el Supremo* uses universal myths, he also refers to the Guaraní creation myth. in this myth Ñamandú creates the world from his own wisdom. according to the version recorded in the *Ayvu Rapyta*:

El verdadero Padre Ñamandú,³ el primero
habiendo concebido su futura morada terrenal,
de la sabiduría contenida en su propia divinidad,
y en virtud de su sabiduría creadora,
hizo que en la extremidad de su vara
fuera engendrándose la tierra. (Cadogan 1992: 49)

indeed, Roa Bastos himself notes the similarity between *el Supremo* and Ñanderuvusú, describing *el Supremo* as: 'el Padre-Último-Primero oculto en los arcanos de la historia, pero vivo en el inconsciente' (1978a: 71).

³ The names of the deities vary depending on which group's version of the myth is being used. Ñamandú is also known as Ñanderuvusú.

as a creating deity, el Supremo must be self-created: he cannot rely on any preceding figure to have brought him into being. El Supremo writes: ‘¿No puede uno acaso nacer de uno mismo? [...] Yo he podido ser concebido sin mujer por la sola fuerza de mi pensamiento. [...] Yo he nacido de mí y Yo solo me he hecho doble’ (1987b: 250). Elsewhere he criticises Patiño, claiming that: ‘lo que haces es quitarme pelo a pelo el poder de nacer y morir por mí mismo. impedir que yo sea mi propio comentario’ (124). Later he says: ‘No quiero ser engendrado en vientre de mujer. Quiero nacer en pensamiento de hombre’ (274). This reliance on thought and wisdom is a polyvalent image: it draws not only on the Enlightenment principle of rational thought but also on an older, indigenous tradition in which the creator’s wisdom is the source of all creation. El Supremo’s attempts to write Paraguay into being rely on Enlightenment principles. as Roa Bastos himself observes: ‘it is easy to observe the predominance of elements that are connected to France. The homonymy between the Dictator Francia and the country France is not the result of chance’ [‘il est aisé d’observer la prédominance d’éléments empruntés à la France. L’homonymie entre le Dictateur Francia [...] et le pays Francia [...] n’est pas fruit du hasard’] (1980: 142, my translation). This foreign voice is an important part of el Supremo’s plan for Paraguay and not only combines with the indigenous voices to create a hybrid culture but in so doing hides their traces.

For the Guaraní, language has a sacred place in their world view. i have already discussed the technical elements Roa Bastos uses to make the Guaraní language present in *Yo el Supremo*. Here i consider the importance of language in Guaraní mythology. as Bartomeu meliá writes: ‘El guaraní es una cultura de la palabra [...]. Toma asiento la palabra cuando un nuevo ser es engendrado, toma pie en la morada terrenal la palabra cuando nace, [...] el que canta y reza se vuelve todo él palabra y nada más que palabra. Se le separa la palabra al que muere’ (1991: 68).

indeed, in the *Ayvu Rapyta* Ñamandú creates language before creating the world. For the Guaraní there is an intimate connection between language and life: one could even say that speech is life. according to the section of the *Ayvu Rapyta* entitled ‘El fundamento del lenguaje humano’:

creó nuestro Padre el fundamento del lenguaje humano
 e hizo que formara parte de su propia divinidad.
 antes de existir la tierra,
 en medio de las tinieblas primigenias,
 antes de tenerse conocimiento de las cosas,
 creó aquello que sería el fundamento del lenguaje humano
 e hizo el verdadero Primer Padre Ñamandú que formara parte de su propia divinidad.
 (Cadogan 1992: 33)

Language forms part of Ñamandú’s very divinity and so imparts this divinity upon those who possess it. This part of the *Ayvu Rapyta* describes men and women as ‘excelsos verdaderos padres de las palabras-almas; / excelsas verdaderas madres de las palabras-almas’ (1992: 39).

El Supremo's attempts to control Paraguay centre on language. When the *pasquín* is discovered he orders Patiño to find the author, saying: 'Vas a ponerte a rastrear la letra del pasquín en todos los expedientes. Legajos de acuerdos, desacuerdos, contraacuerdos. Comunicaciones internacionales. Tratados. Notas reversales' (Roa Bastos 1987b: 116). Making Patiño search for the handwriting throughout the entire national archive demonstrates how he craves control of language. He also complains bitterly of Patiño's poor style, telling him that: 'No sabes secretar lo que dicto. Tuerces retuerces mis palabras. [...] Tu estilo es además abominable' (157), and so el Supremo gives Patiño a writing lesson. The dictator says to his secretary: 'guiaré tu mano como si escribiera yo' (160), but Patiño protests, saying: '¡Señor... usted maneja mi mano!' (161).

As the novel progresses el Supremo's command of language starts to weaken. Not only does he start to suffer from aphasia but a *letra desconocida* starts to comment on his writings, and other voices start to make themselves heard, becoming ever more scathing. El Supremo's dog, Sultán, describes his master's growing aphasia, saying: 'Es posible que pierdas el uso de la palabra. [...] Palabras equivocadas, desemejantes, mutiladas; no las que has visto y querido pronunciar' (555). For the Guaraní this loss of language is equivalent to death. Eventually an anonymous voice takes over the narration, saying: 'y ya no puedes obrar. Dices que no quieres asistir al desastre de tu Patria, que tú mismo le has preparado. morirás antes. [...] Para ti no hay rescate posible. a los otros se les comerá el olvido. Tú, ex Supremo eres quien debe dar cuenta de todo y pagar hasta el último cuadrante' (595).

As the soul is linked to language in the Guaraní world view, el Supremo's attempts to control language are effectively attempts to control the very souls of his subjects. However, his death starts with him losing the use of language and so his power is ultimately undone in the terms of Guaraní myth.

The theme of the double is important in *Yo el Supremo*. according to the Guaraní world view, people have two souls, one divine and one telluric. The divine soul is related to language, plant foods and the noble elements of being human, whereas the telluric soul is related to carnal desires, eating meat and the animal side of the being. Schaden describes these souls as: 'un alma buena, de origen divino, que después de la muerte va al Cielo, y otra que se volverá mala o peligrosa, tanto peor y más peligrosa, cuanto más el individuo en vida se haya dejado llevar por sus inclinaciones anti-sociales' (1998: 138). However, as Curt Nimuendaju Unkel observes: 'no se trata de la oposición entre el Bien y el mal sino entre las diferentes temperamentos humanos: entre el temperamento flemático-melancólico y el sanguíneo-colérico' (1978: 65). The destinies of the souls after death are different: the divine soul – or *ayvukué* – proceeds to the afterlife, whereas the telluric soul – *asyiguá* – remains on Earth.

There are numerous references to this idea of multiple souls in the novel. For example, on one occasion el Supremo imagines a conversation with Blaise Pascal where the Frenchman says: 'Tú, mestizo de dos almas, te sientes como extraviado en este remoto cantón de la naturaleza' (Roa Bastos 1987b: 208). This image of el

Supremo as the sum of two souls could refer to his hybridity having been born to European parents in the largely indigenous culture of eighteenth-century Paraguay, but it also refers to the Guaraní belief in double souls. Nonetheless, this is presented by a character representing the Enlightenment, thus effacing its Guaraní origins.

The character of el Supremo is divided into two components; *Yo* and *Él*. These components correspond roughly to the private person and the public figure. *Él* is more than just part of the person: it is also the power he wields. They also refer to the dual souls of Guaraní mythology. *Yo* represents el Supremo's good intentions, his desire to protect the people of Paraguay from the instability that dogged Paraguay's neighbours in the early years of independence. as such it corresponds to the divine soul. *Él*, however, is the side of his rule and his personality that made him into a tyrant. This part of his being corresponds to the telluric soul and so remains behind, stalking Paraguay and reincarnating in subsequent dictators. El Supremo sees this danger, and says: 'Si por ahí, como quien no quiere la cosa, encuentras por azar la huella de la especie a que pertenezco, bórrela. Tape el rastro. Si en alguna grieta perdida encuentra esa cizaña, arránquela de raíz' (417). it is, however, too late, and shortly afterwards he sees his *asyiguá* leaving his body:

Hace crujir el maderamen de los escalones. Se detiene en el último. El más resistente. El escalón de la Constancia, del Poder, del mando. aparece el halo de su erguida presencia. Aureola al rojo vivo en torno a la oscura silueta. Continúa avanzando. [...] *Él* está ahí. [...] *La* sombra de una espada se proyecta en la pared: *la* uña del índice me apunta. me atraviesa. *Él* sonrío. (591)

Roa Bastos uses the Guaraní concept of multiple souls as a way of approaching the complexities and controversies of Francia's rule. The divine soul represents the positive aspects of his rule (stability and protecting the poor, maintaining Paraguay's independence), while the telluric soul represents the negative aspects (his paranoia, the repression of any dissenting voices).

Elsewhere Roa Bastos uses myths from other, non-Guaraní cultures of Paraguay, at one point referring to the Nivaklé concept of the soul. In this passage he summons a Nivaklé healer to treat his ills. The healer explains that: 'Todos los seres tienen dobles. Pero el doble del humano es uno y triple al mismo tiempo. [...] El alma primera se llama huevo. Luego está el alma-chica, situada en el centro. [...] *La* tercer alma es *vatajpikl*: *la* sombra' (295–96). The healer adds that if one of the souls was missing, then, the person would continue living but with constant headaches and pains, but if he is not healed promptly then the other souls can be stolen by malevolent demons called *chivosis* (297). The healer tells el Supremo that he can do nothing for him as he 've enteramente vacío el interior de Su Señoría. [...] *Las* tres almas se han ido ya. [...] *La* piedra grande de la muerte ha caído adentro y ya no hay forma de sacarla' (297).

The theme of the double can also be related to the Guaraní myth of the twins. In the Apapokuva–Guaraní version of this myth, the *Padre-último-primero* (whom this group call Ñanderuvusú) decides to create a woman. He and his assistant

Ñanderú-Mbaekuaá both sleep with the woman – Ñandesy – and she gives birth to false twins, each having a different father. However, she argues with Ñanderuvusú and tells him that neither of them is his son. This angers him and he leaves the Earth to live in the heavens. She tries to find him, but is eaten by the *tigre azul*. The older twin tries to reconstruct her body, but he fails as Ñanderuvusú has already taken her soul to the *Tierra sin Mal*. El Supremo modifies this myth, claiming that: ‘los mellizos no nacieron de una madre. Nacieron de sí y engendraron a su madre’ (250), so that he can repudiate his parents in order to see himself as a divine figure. Fischer notes that: ‘Esta técnica de adaptación se puede leer como un intento de resolver la paradoja intrínseca del proyecto del Supremo; por un lado quiere establecerse a sí mismo como “punto cero” de la nación paraguaya [...] por otro quiere dar voz “a los antiguos” del Paraguay que obviamente son anteriores a su gobierno’ (1991: 98). He has to modify the myth in order to resolve the paradox of including elements that precede him in his model nation. Carla Fernandes states that

el Supremo is obsessed with the theme of the double and of self-birth. He does not want to owe his existence to a father or a mother. One example taken directly from Guaraní mythology accentuates his impossible desire to be born of himself; the myth of the twins. (2001: 44)

[Le Suprême est obsédé par le thème du double et de son auto-naissance. il ne veut devoir la vie, ni a un père, ni a une mère. Un exemple, directement tiré de la mythologie guarani, accentue encore davantage son désir impossible de naître de lui-même. Il s’agit du mythe des jumeaux.] (My translation)

a further reference to the myth of the twins appears towards the end of the novel where Patiño tells el Supremo of a family that was found wandering at night in Asunción and so was arrested. At first the family seems to consist of two parents and a daughter, but further investigation reveals that the adults are the aunt and uncle. The child’s rags come apart as the guards struggle to lift her, revealing a second headless child attached to her chest. Their aunt explains that: ‘la criatura sin órganos hacía sus necesidades por los conductos de la niña y así los dos se alimentaban y vivían de lo mismo’ (Roa Bastos 1987b: 565). as in the myth of the twins, the mother of these children vanished shortly after their birth. The children’s aunt explains that they have brought them to asunción because: ‘El Payé payaguá que cría chanchos de monte [...] nos dijo que viniéramos a ver a nuestro Karáí Guazú, porque en algún tiempo y lugar estos mellizos contra natura iban a ser adivinos y podían resultar útiles al Supremo Gobierno’ (566). The grotesque image of the second twin symbolises the malformed nature of el Supremo’s Paraguay.⁴ Fischer notes that: ‘su mera existencia niega aquella idea obsesiva del dictador de que él es el origen absoluta de la nación paraguaya’ (1991: 103). It is also significant that the twins of Guaraní myth are the first humans, after the divine figures of Ñanderuvusú, Ñandesy and Ñanderú-Mbae-

4 it is also interesting to observe the presence of unexplained Guaraní words such as *payé*, *karáí* and *guazú* in this short extract.

kuaá. If the twins that appear in *Yo el Supremo* are the prototype of Paraguayans under el Supremo's rule, then, they reflect the failings of el Supremo as a creator. He creates a misshapen society that cannot survive without him.

There are multiple examples of talking bones in the novel. This can also be seen as a reference to indigenous myth as the divine soul is located in the skeleton, whereas the telluric soul is located in the flesh. For example, el Supremo maintains a dialogue with a skull he found as a child. Also, in the case of el Supremo the two elements of which he is formed separate as his flesh starts to decay. The scene in which *Él* walks away from *Yo* is followed by a detailed description of the process of decay and the various insects that will devour his remains. Talking bones are also represented by el Supremo's dog, Sultán, whose skeleton comes to life to criticise its former master, saying: 'En la obcecación de tu Poder absoluto por el que crees dominarlo todo, no has adquirido ni siquiera un real de la sabiduría del rey Salomón' (Roa Bastos 1987b: 542). Sultán then forces el Supremo to confront some of his actions such as the order to execute his servant, Pilar.

another Guaraní myth that appears in *Yo el Supremo* is the myth of the *tigre azul*. The *tigre azul* accompanies Ñanderuvusú in his celestial dwelling, sleeping under his hammock. When Ñanderuvusú decides to destroy the world the *tigre azul* will kill all humans. It is also believed to cause eclipses by devouring the sun. There are two references to this particular myth in *Yo el Supremo*. In one el Supremo describes a festival held in honour of the Spanish governor in 1804. During the festival a rider from the Kaaiguá-Gualachí people throws a ring into the lap of the Governor's daughter, while his horse turns into a 'tigre completamente azul' (389). The ring then turns into a giant snake, as the daughter bleeds to death and the rider flies off on the horse, which has now become a blue tiger. Elsewhere in the novel el Supremo claims his father was killed by a jaguar while he watched. He writes: 'vi al tigre destrozar a zarpazos a don Engracia [...]. apunté con cuidado, ceremoniosamente, sin apuro' (437). He adds that, as his father dies: 'cerré los ojos y sentí que nacía. [...] don Engracia acaba de morir. Pues bien, yo acabo de nacer' (438). The symbolic death of el Supremo's father combines the Guaraní myth of the *tigre azul* with the archetype of the dying and reviving god.

Another significant use of myths, both indigenous Paraguayan in origin and from other cultures, can be seen in el Supremo's belief that his Paraguay is a utopian state. He mentions travellers' praise for his government as proof of the perfection of his Paraguay. According to el Supremo, one pair of travellers tell him that: 'el Paraguay es una Utopía real y Su Excelencia el Solón de los tiempos modernos' (457). He reminds other travellers that they had described his government as 'el más generoso y magnánimo que existe sobre la tierra civilizada' (231). This supposed utopianism contains strong echoes of the Guaraní myth of the *Tierra sin Mal*. This is one of the seven paradises that Ñanderuvusú created when he created the world. Unlike the Christian paradise, the *Tierra sin Mal* is open to all Guaraní irrespective of their behaviour on Earth. As Schaden notes: 'la religión guaraní no conoce, en su forma original, castigo *post mortem*' (1998:

173). instead, any wrongdoing on Earth is attributed to the telluric soul and it is the divine soul that goes to the *Tierra sin Mal*. another important feature of the *Tierra sin Mal* is that it is a physical location on Earth that can be reached in life with the right preparation. Schaden writes: 'antiguamente, se cuenta, el paraíso era accesible a todos, y muchos encontraban el camino porque rezaban confiados a *Nanderykey*, [...] el héroe civilizador' (198). However, according to Schaden, the present-day Guaraní believe that they will have to wait for death in order to reach the *Tierra sin Mal* as they believe they have become weak and gained vices such as eating European foods. The quest for reaching the *Tierra sin Mal* gained popularity as increased contact with Europeans led to a crisis in the different Guaraní societies. as their ancestral lands were overrun and their cultures destroyed they began to fear the end of the world. These migrations towards the *Tierra sin Mal* involved large numbers of people of all ages following a *karái*, or charismatic spiritual leader, who would lead them on long marches towards one of the two locations where the *Tierra sin Mal* was reported to be: west towards the Andes and east across the ocean. It is significant that el Supremo is repeatedly referred to as the *Karái Guazú* by his subjects. *Guazú* means great, and so *Karái Guazú* would mean something like 'great leader'.

Nonetheless, there are also important differences. The *Tierra sin Mal* is not just a place where death does not exist and where the fields provide food without the need to sow, but it is also a place whose inhabitants are freed from the rules of society. Clearly, this place where work is disdained and where the rules of society are not applicable differs very much from el Supremo's personal vision of a tightly controlled society. according to el Supremo: 'La libertad ni cosa alguna puede subsistir sin orden, sin reglas, sin una unidad [...]. De otra suerte, la libertad [...] vendrá a parar en una desenfrenada licencia, que todo lo reduciría a confusión en un campo de discordias, de alborotos' (Roa Bastos 1987b: 284). However, el Supremo's attempts to preserve order mean that instead of being the Utopia he plans, his Paraguay instead becomes a dystopia. As a character who had been allowed to leave Paraguay says when asked if he felt unhappy there: '¡No, señor, de ningún modo! Buena tierra, buena gente y sobre todo qué buen gobierno. ¡Pero veinticinco años!' (467).

Throughout *Yo el Supremo* a large number of different voices struggle for the right to define Paraguay in their terms. The voice of el Supremo is dominant for the majority of the novel, but as the end nears his grip on power weakens and he finds it ever harder to control the discourses that define the nation. The beliefs of the many indigenous groups that exist in Paraguay make an important contribution to the multi-voicing of the novel, as various authors observe. However, they are less apparent than the metropolitan voices. Roa Bastos includes many examples of these beliefs in an attempt to represent Paraguay's hybridised culture. These different ways of reflecting on and interacting with the West's views of Paraguay are an example of what Mary Louise Pratt defines as autoethnography. as she observes: 'autoethnographic texts are not [...] what are usually thought of as autochthonous or "authentic" forms of self representation [...].

Rather they involve a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis or conqueror' (1993: 28). By engaging with these external representations of Paraguay, el Supremo hopes to adapt them and impose his own view of the nation. However, in so doing, he must represent the indigenous and mestizo mass of society, something he is incapable of doing because of his Enlightenment beliefs. No matter how hard he tries, he cannot avoid his paternalistic view of the people. El Supremo unavoidably writes from a perspective of modernity and so the indigenous is always Other to him. This brings us back to the question of the *texto ausente* and how much Roa Bastos as author shares this problem with el Supremo as dictator (in both the political and literary senses of the word).

To conclude, throughout *Yo el Supremo* the *texto ausente* is foregrounded whenever el Supremo speaks for the people. His inability to do so brings the *texto ausente* to the fore. Representation involves creating the illusion that something absent is actually present and, by attempting to represent the indigenous voice, el Supremo actually emphasises its absence as a voice in his Paraguay, a land where the only voice is his own. The indigenous voice is present in the polyphonic text, but must struggle for protagonism with a plethora of other voices, all of which undermine el Supremo's control over language. myth and the *texto ausente* undermine el Supremo's monologic voice, inducing a Bakhtinian polyphony, and so they become liberating for the author, as it enables him to undermine the voice of dictatorship.

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