A Critique of Reading/Writing:

From *Don Quixote* to *I the Supreme*

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Achieving immediate recognition in Europe, *Don Quixote* crossed the Atlantic Ocean to the shores of the New World and rebelling against the bans imposed by the Spanish Inquisition became a "hero" who confronted all kinds of vicissitudes and obstacles. Alejo Carpentier, the well-known Cuban novelist, notes more than 350 years later that Spain could have had no better Ambassador than Don Quixote through the ages.¹ In this article, I propose a reading of a contemporary Latin American to view afresh Don Quixote’s sallies in the Americas – Augusto Roa Bastos’ *I the Supreme* (1974)². Roa Bastos’ novel deals with the theme of Latin American dictatorships, specifically the power of writing in relation to writing about power, the question of historical representations in postcolonial contexts and the character’s self-awareness about the process of his own representation through writing.

The revolutionary leaders of Latin American independence, much like Don Quixote, performed “fabulous feats” as far removed

¹ Alejo Carpentier, Speech delivered while receiving the Cervantes Award, 1977. http://www.mcu.es/premiado
² Augusto Roa Bastos, *I the Supreme*, (Translated by Helen R Lane), Faber and Faber, London/ Boston, 1986. All quotations are taken from this edition and page numbers will be indicated in the text.
from reality as Cervantes' knight errant, firmly believing in their quest for justice and taking freedom to be their beloved Dulcinea, so much so that an exasperated Bolívar is supposed to have jocularly signed a decree ordering the execution of the Knight of the Woeful Figure so that none may set forth to imitate him\(^3\). According to a traditional guaraní story, Dr. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, the Paraguayan dictator (1810 – 1840), who is the protagonist of Roa Bastos' novel, is said to have had in his study an antique lectern and on this lectern was placed a big book, always open; the pages of this book were said to be soiled, dirty and full of strange notes on the margins, suggesting that it was very frequently read or consulted.

In his speech delivered while receiving the Cervantes Award in 1989\(^4\), Roa Bastos narrates this story and says that in his novel, he places on the Supreme's lectern, Cervantes' immortal *Don Quixote*, on the belief that it could not have been any other book. The Supreme probably read and made notes like yet another furtive Avellaneda trying to rewrite for the third time the adventures of the knight errant, only that in this version he himself would be the knight errant and the "fabulous" stories would be about his feats. The dictator's admiration for Cervantes in the novel by one of the dictator's detractors, Dr. V Días de Ventura, in his letter to Brother Mariano Ignacio Bel-Asshole:

> ... our Great Man disappears now and again for periodic confinements. He cloisters himself for months

\(^3\) Guillermo Diaz Plaja en "Don Quijote en el país de Martín Fierro" Madrid, 1952.  
\(^4\) Speech delivered while receiving the Cervantes Award, 1989.  
http://www.mcu.es/premiado  
* The Supremo's nickname for Brother Velasco.
at a time ... so as to devote himself to the study of projects and plans that his feverish imagination claims to have conceived in order to place Paraguay at the head of the American states. The rumour has leaked out, however, that these withdrawals to his *hortus conclusus* are for the purpose of writing a novel imitating the Quixote, for which he feels a fascinated admiration. To our novelist Dictator’s misfortune, he is not missing an arm like Cervantes, who lost it in the glorious battle of Lepanto, and at the same time he is more than lacking in brains and wit. (67)

Roa Bastos, in the same speech mentioned above, talks about his indebtedness to Cervantes’ *magnum opus*:

The main nucleus of my novel, in relation to Don Quixote, was to imagine a double of the woeful Cervantine figure and convert him into the knight errant of the Absolute; that is to say, a Knight of the Woeful Figure, who crazily believes in the power of writing and who tries to achieve this myth of the Absolute in the island that he had just created; in the symbiosis of real and symbolic reality, oral tradition and the written word.

The “knight errant of the Absolute” in Roa Bastos’ novel, drunk on the madness of Enlightenment ideas, desires to create the most independent and autonomous state in the American continent but paradoxically ends up declaring himself the Perpetual Dictator and ruling it with an iron hand. A great admirer of Cervantes, he wishes to recreate a novel, in the manner of the *Quixote*, to record his “adventures” and “fabulous feats”, dictated to his secretary-squire, the Sancho-like ignorant but faithful Policarpo Patiño. The dictator’s dictations, taken down faithfully by Patiño, form the
main narrative thread of *I the Supreme*. However, according to his opponents, though he considers himself Caesar and a Phoenix of Wit his brain has been dried up by melancholy (like Don Quixote’s) and by his venomous envy and hatred for his critics — mainly the writers and intellectuals of the period.

The novel begins with the appearance of an anonymous pasquinade, imitating the Supreme’s handwriting and style, decreeing his death and giving detailed instructions to government officials on the actions to be taken after his death. Enraged by this overt and audacious act of rebellion, the Supreme orders his faithful squire to get to the bottom of the matter and discover the identity of the libels. Dissatisfied with the progress of the investigations, he then decides to write his own version of History in order to explain matters and set the records right. The novel is a multilayered structure, a compilation of several different “modes of writing”. In the first place, the dictator dictates notes - presented as a dialogue between the Supreme and Patiño, whose task is to copy down his words as faithfully as possible. In the second place, the dictator issues Perpetual Circulars to his officials periodically to give them advice on matters of governance. Interspersed are entries made by the Dictator in his Private Notebook, which is kept closely guarded under lock and key. This privacy is violated time and again by an unknown hand that mysteriously enters the secret domain and inserts comments on the margins contradicting and confronting the Supreme’s version of history. These four kinds of writings are threaded together by a compiler who weaves through these narratives and comments on them through notes and footnotes. The novel has two levels of compilation: the Supreme’s copier-secretary Patiño, and then by a Final Compiler. On the last page, there appears a note by the Final Compiler, in which we are told that the novel is a compilation culled or coaxed from
published and unpublished documents like letters, circulars, oral testimonies, memoirs, etc. taken from public and private libraries, and then reproduced in the form of novel. However, the compiler also insists that the characters and facts figuring in the text are no more or no less fictitious than the readers.

We find several motifs in *I the Supreme* echoing those of the Cervantine novel. I shall examine three such motifs: the symbiotic relationship between the dictator and his scribe akin to the relationship between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza; the self-conscious manner in which the characters understand and guide their own representations; and the problematic of representation of reality highlighted by a continuous ironic play between the real and the unreal.

The conversations between the Supreme and his scribe are in the same tenor and tone as that of the conversations between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. In fact, on more than one occasion, the Supreme fondly addresses Patiño as his dear Sancho Panza:

> What I beg of you, my dear Sancho Pauncho, is that you not try, when I dictate to you, to artificialize the nature of the matter being dealt with, but rather to naturalize the artificiality of words. You are my excretive secretary. You write what I dictate to you as though you yourself were speaking in my place in secret on paper. (57)

Both Sancho and Patiño are a contrast to their well-read masters. Both are inarticulate in their command over language and need to be constantly corrected. Don Quixote chides Sancho for his incorrect and improper use of language, while the dictator is exasperated at the imperfect language that his scribe uses:
You have been my trust-unworthy secretary for more than twenty years now, and you still don’t know how to secrete what I dictate. You twist and turn my words around. ... Don’t use improper words that are not my style, that are not steeped in my thought. I loathe relative talent that’s begged and borrowed. What’s more, your style is abominable. A labyrinthine alleyway paved with alliterations, anagrams, idiosyncratic idioms, barbarisms, paronomasias, such as pároli/ párulis, imbecilic anastrophes to dazzle imbecilic inverts ... The principle fault I tax you with is your inability to express yourself with the originality of a parrot. You are nothing more than a speaking biohuman. Instead of transcribing what I dictate to you in its natural state, you fill the paper with incomprehensible barbarisms. Pieces of mischief already written by others. (56)

Both Sancho and Patiño are down-to-earth, sensible and sane and they recognise things for what they are. Both of them know the most intimate secrets of their masters. But here ends the similarity between Patiño and Sancho. While Sancho is presented as an equal because of the way Don Quixote treats him, Patiño is definitely not the Supreme’s equal. Sancho sees the world as it is – giants and not windmills, Benedictine saints and not necromancers and kidnappers of princesses, flocks of sheep and not armies – and never fears to contradict his master. But, unlike Sancho, the mere thought of expressing any disagreement or contradicting the Supreme terrifies Patiño.

Both Don Quixote’s and the Supreme’s genealogies are in doubt. In Cervantes’ novel we know that “some say his surname was Quixada, or Quesada (for authors differ in this particular):
however, we may reasonably conjecture he was called Quixana”. Likewise, Dr. Francia identity too is in question; some believe him to be of Brazilian precedence while others claim him to be of Spanish or Portuguese or even French descent. Again in the voice of one of his detractors we are told:

The element cleverly used by the Portuguese-Brazilian to compound the confusion and thereby conceal the bastard origins of his adventurous life are the letters of his suppositious names: the Portuguese suffix *es* changed to the Castilian *ez*, as it appears in certain documents; the maternal name (the ç of França, with a little cedilla underneath), ... has also been Castilianized. The one thing that is certain is that after living in Paraguay and engaging in the most diverse occupations, ... no one knows who he is nor where he came from. (273)

Don Quixote believes that to him is entrusted the task of “redressing all manner of grievances” and bringing about justice in the world so as to gain honour and renown. Don Quixote’s madness lies in the fact that he mistakes the unreal for reality, replacing what he perceives by what he imagines or desires to see. Having lost use of his reason, all the fables and fantastic tales that he reads seem to him as true as the most authentic stories. The Supreme too sees himself as the liberator of his country and a saviour of the poor and indigenous people; he is particularly careful about his image. He condemns his detractors as concocters of “accounts of imaginary facts seasoned to suit the taste of the moment or their interests ... those who will recount invented falsehoods, the story of what has not happened”.  

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In both the novels the characters are self-conscious of the process of their creation and representation. In Chapter III of the Second Part of the Quixote, Sancho informs Don Quixote that they are already characters of a book written by a Moorish historian Cide Hamete Benengeli recounting their adventures in Arabic, and which had been later translated into Spanish. He then offers to call the Bachelor Sanson Carrasco who could shed more light on this matter. When asked about what people think of him, Carrasco tells him that there are varying opinions but swears by the popularity of his book. Don Quixote feels elated over the popularity of the book, though at first he is suspicious of the writer's credentials. Don Quixote only concern at that moment is to be presented in good light though he is plagued with doubts:

... some learned sage had, by way of enchantment, been able to commit them to the press, either as a friend, to extol his heroic achievements above the noblest performances of the most famous knight-errant; or as an enemy, to sully and annihilate the lustre of his great exploits, and debase them ... and after all, if there were such a book printed, since it was the history of a knight-errant, it could not choose but be pompous, lofty, magnificent, and authentic. (3, II)

On the contrary, in I the Supreme, the dictator controls the process of creation of his-story and that of his character since he is the one who dictates. The dictator's existence is realised only through his dictation. The moment the dictation ends he too would cease to exist. Therefore, he must continue dictating in order to exist and to remember his existence:

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In the beginning, I did not write; I only dictated. Then I forgot what I had dictated. Now I must dictate/write; note it down somewhere. That is the only way I have of proving that I still exist. (45)

As I dictate to you, you write. Whereas I read what I dictate to you so as later to reread what you write. In the end the two of us disappear in what is read/written. (14)

Carlos Fuentes, the Mexican novelist, in a critical essay entitled Cervantes or the Critique of Reading, looks at Don Quixote as a knight who represents faith — a faith that emanates from reading. Don Quixote’s madness stems from an obsessive reading of novels of chivalry which he attempts to translate into reality. But, from being a mere master of reading that dries up his brains, Don Quixote becomes, at a second level of reading, a master of words of the verbal world of the book Don Quixote. He is in complete control of his “adventures” as he is no longer just the reader of novels of chivalry but becomes an actor of his own adventures. Just as he did not differentiate between the world of his books and reality, there is no chasm between his actions and the words of his adventure. There is a complete identification in Don Quixote between reading, madness, truth and life. In the second part, when Don Quixote becomes aware that his adventures are being written about he becomes the first hero who is viewed from multiple perspectives. He is read and he reads himself as others would read him. Don Quixote fails in his attempt to translate into reality the epics that he has read. But as an object of reading, he

5 Fuentes, Carlos, Cervantes, o la crítica de la lectura, Joaquín Mortiz, México, p. 5. Also see Speech delivered while receiving the Cervantes Award at http://www.mcu.es/premiado
begins to take control over reality, to contaminate it with his own mad reading: not the reading of the novels of chivalry as he earlier did but in his reading of Don Quixote itself. According to Fuentes, the multiplicity of perspectives is born precisely at the moment that Sancho and Don Quixote realise that they are being written about, read and seen. One could say that they no longer stand alone, they are accompanied by the eyes of their readers and begin to acquire a new existence – in the imagination of these readers – and immortality, guaranteed as long as there are new readers who open their book to read about them.

In Cervantes’ novel, when Carrasco tells Don Quixote that some of his readers wish that they had been spared the details of the drubbings he receives at the hands of those he “saves”, Sancho replies that the truth of the story lay precisely in an uncontaminated representation of history. Don Quixote does not quite agree with Sancho and replies that “actions that do not impair or alter the course of history ought to be buried in silence rather than related so as not to discredit the hero of the history”. Carrasco then replies:

I am of your opinion, but it is one thing to write like a poet, and another thing to write like an historian. It is sufficient for the first to deliver matters as they ought to have been, whereas the last must relate them as they were really transacted, without adding or omitting anything, upon any pretence whatever. (3, II)

The narrator of the story intervenes at this point to say that although he would have gladly left out certain matters that would represent the hero in bad light ....

The author of this important history being come to the matters which he relates in this chapter, says he
would willingly have left buried into oblivion, in a manner despairing of his reader's belief: for Don Quixote's madness flies here to such an extravagant pitch, that it may be said to have outstripped, by two bow-shots, all imaginable credulity. However, notwithstanding this mistrust, he has set down every particular, just the same as was transacted, without adding or diminishing in the least such objections as may be raised to impeach him of breach of veracity. (10, II)

The different levels of narration and the discussion of "authorship" in Cervantes' novel – we are never sure who is the real author, Cid Hamete or the supposed translator or the one who chances upon the manuscript relating the adventures of Don Quixote – emphasise the possibility of a multiplicity of perspectives and challenge the idea of a singular and "true" representation of history. Similarly, in Roa Bastos' novel too, there is a discussion on the question of truth and veracity in history writing. The different modalities of writing used for "compiling" the novel argue for multiple perspectives in reading/writing history. The compiler functions as a historian, obsessed with the "truth" but nevertheless realising that it could be seen as yet another version as opposed to the Supreme's version. The use of a compiler as the main narrator in I the Supreme rejects the notion that the written text is incorruptible and denies the possibility of inventing a language in which the sign is identical to the object.

In his book, The Order of Things, Michel Foucault, refers to the issue of representation in Don Quixote that marks a new beginning in the relation between resemblance and signs. He says:
His whole being is nothing but language, text, printed pages, stories that have already been writing down. He is made up of interwoven words; he is writing itself, wandering through the world among the resemblance of things. Yet not entirely so: The chivalric romances have provided once and for all a written prescription for his adventure. And every episode, every decision, every exploit will be yet another sign that Don Quixote is a true likeness of all the signs that he has traced from his book. But the fact that he wishes to be like them means that he must put them to test, that the signs no longer resemble people. All those written texts, all those extravagant romances are, quite literally, unparalleled: no one in the world ever did resemble them; their timeless language remains suspended, unfulfilled by any similitude; they could all be burned in their entirety and the form of the world would not be changed.  

This quest for a “pure” language in which the sign would be identical to the object it represents is impossible to achieve and hence, doomed to failure from the start. What becomes important, therefore, are no longer resemblances, but identities and differences.

In an interview to Debra Castillo⁷, Fuentes explains the debt that contemporary novelists owe to Don Quixote, the founding

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novel of the modern world. Don Quixote, according to Fuentes, comes from a medieval world, which is a world of analogy, where everything has a meaning. All words have a precise meaning, a precise function, and all things have a precise place. But he steps out into another world where this analogy is shattered and his quest for analogy leads him to proliferating differentiation. All the people he meets on his sallies tell him that the world of unity and analogy does not exist and instead offer him a world of never-ending diversity. Don Quixote rejects the idea of purity and unity in the orthodox sense but ends up defeated and dejected in his project.

This search for an “authentic” language, in which the word would be able to establish a direct correspondence with the object is part of the Supreme’s project too in Roa Bastos’ novel. The Supreme tells Patiño as he expresses his unhappiness over the form his dictation takes:

When I dictate to you, the words have a meaning; when you write them, another. So that we speak two different languages. One feels more at home in the company of a familiar dog than in that of a man speaking a language unknown to us. False language is much less sociable than silence. (57)

Could you invent a language in which the sign is identical to the object? (58)

The Supreme realises that this is an impossible task but nevertheless urges Patiño to try:

forget your memory. To write does not mean to convert the real into words but to make the power of the
word real. The unreal lies only in the bad use of the
dower of words in the bad use of writing. (59)

He also realises, in the same way that Don Quixote and
Sancho Panza see themselves taking shape in the printing press,
that his and Patiño’s existence is real only insofar as they are being
read or written.

Cervantes, one-armed, writes his great novel with
his missing hand. Who could maintain that the Gaunt
Knight in the Green Greatcoat is less real than the
author himself? Who could deny that his fat secretary-
squire is less real than you; mounted on his mule,
plodding along behind his master’s old nag, more real
than you mounted on the basin, awkwardly bridling
your goose quill? (66)

Two hundred years later, the witnesses of those
stories are no longer alive. Two hundred years younger,
readers do not know if they are fables, true stories,
pretended truths. The same thing will come to pass with
us. We too will pass for real-unreal beings. (66)

One could say that the issue of “writing/orality” is central
to Roa Bastos’ novel. The loss in terms of representation in the
movement from the oral sound to the written word concerns the
dictator. At the same time, he is conscious of the power of writing
and believes that his existence lies in his ability to write. Writing is
the only security he has from being condemned to oblivion. For
him, immortality lies in the power of the word and in his adept use
of it. As the novel progresses he gradually loses control over
writing, which, at the end of the novel, is further exacerbated by a
loss of memory and speech. This inability to write/speak leads
from absolute power to a complete loss of power. The dictator is as suspicious of writers (other than him) as Don Quixote is and virulently hates "pen-pushers" of all kinds who do "invent stories to suit their needs or interests" and does not miss an opportunity to berate and curse them. Just as Cervantes berates Avellaneda, the author of the apocryphal *Quixote*, in the Introduction to his novel, the dictator too is mortally petrified of the written word and its authors and even promulgates laws against them.

The writing mania appears to be the symptom of an uncontainable century. Outside of Paraguay, when has so much been written as in the days since the world has lain in perpetual convulsion? Not even the Romans in their period of decadence. There is no deadly merchandise than the books of these convulsionaries. There is no worse plague than the scribonic. Menders of lies and benders of truth. Lenders of their pens, the borrowed plumes of plebeian peacocks. (67)

Carlos Fuentes, in his essay, extols Cervantes for creating the truly modern novel reasserting the value of diversity precisely at a historical moment when there was a demand for unity:

If counterreformation demands unity in language, Cervantes gives it a multiplicity of languages; if it demands faith, he returns doubts. But if modernity demands constant doubt, Cervantes, more modern than modernity, gives it faith in justice and love and demands from it a minimum of unity that would allow us to understand diversity.8

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8 Fuentes, *Cervantes, o la crítica de la lectura*, p. 5.
One could say that by rejecting a monolithic and singular perspective in historical representation, Roa Bastos pays his debt to Cervantes through a novel in which plurality is not only acknowledged but the ambiguous, equivocal character of reality is celebrated. Belonging to a country ruled perpetually by dictators ever since Independence and forced to remain in exile for more than forty years Augusto Roa Bastos is conscious of the absent oral contexts of Paraguayan reality and hence, this celebration of plurality can be seen as an act of radical challenge to official historiography. In his own words:

My project of the novel consisted in writing a counter history, a subversive and transgressive reply to official historiography. ...Anti history must become intrahistory and simultaneously transhistory. The guarantee of this improbable and uncertain achievement lay in achieving a reality, autonomous of imaginary texts; in other words, in taking the status of pure fiction, without it being a break from historical referents.⁹