

= I , the Supreme =

I , the Supreme (orig . Spanish Yo el supremo) is a historical novel written by exiled Paraguayan author Augusto Roa Bastos . It is a fictionalized account of the nineteenth @-@ century Paraguayan dictator José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia , who was also known as " Dr. Francia . " The book 's title derives from the fact that Francia referred to himself as " El Supremo " or " the Supreme . " The first in a long line of dictators , the Supreme was a severe , calculating despot . The central themes of the novel are power and language and the relation between the two . The Supreme believes himself to be above all power and history : " I don 't write history . I make it . I can remake it as I please , adjusting , stressing , enriching its meaning and truth . " Yet this assertion is constantly challenged by the very fact that while he achieves power by means of writing and dictating , these very same methods can be used by others to dispute his authority . Not even his own identity , represented by the personal pronoun I , is safe and can easily be usurped as is demonstrated by the incident of the pasquinade . Language , as powerful as it is , can never be controlled and can just as easily be used as an instrument of coercion as an instrument of resistance .

During the time the book was written , Paraguay was under the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner , who went on to rule the country even longer than Francia did . Many consider the book to be at least in part a thinly disguised attack on Stroessner who used methods similar to Francia 's to achieve and maintain the effective control of the country , including the swift elimination of opposition , the employment of torture and intolerance of dissent . In its portrayal of Francia and criticism of Stroessner , I , the Supreme belongs to the genre of novelas de dictadores or dictator novels , and also to the Latin American Boom , a literary movement of the 1960s and 1970s . The book was first published in Spanish in 1974 , and in English (translation by Helen Lane) in 1986 .

Like many other works of the Latin American boom , the book never became an international best @-@ seller . It was , however , highly regarded by critics with Gerald Martin claiming that it was , " an exceptional cultural phenomenon . " Martin goes on to suggest that it was " more immediately and unanimously acclaimed than any novel since One Hundred Years of Solitude , [and its] strictly historical importance [may] be even greater than that of García Márquez 's fabulously successful creation . " The book 's handling of the themes of power and language was also praised . Still , the novel was not well received by Stroessner 's government and Roa Bastos became " one of the three citizens forbidden to return " to Paraguay as a result .

= = Historical context = =

After declaring independence from colonial Spain in May 1811 , land @-@ locked Paraguay established itself as the first Republic of South America . Dr. Francia was elected by the junta (or congress) to office and he established himself as dictator for life , until his death in 1840 . He ruled with a despotic populism in which the ideals he had drawn from the philosophers of the French Enlightenment were tempered by his aristocratic insistence on absolute rule . As John T. Deiner explains , he " created an army in which all citizens were required to serve . He confiscated property from the upper classes and used the state 's coercive power to direct the working of that land by the army . " He also isolated the country from the outside world , restricting foreign trade and mobility . Political opposition was not tolerated .

Francia 's rule was the beginning of a long line of dictators , including Carlos Antonio López (who was president of Paraguay with dictatorial powers from 1844 to 1862) and López 's son , Francisco Solano López (who ruled between 1862 and 1870) . It was Solano López who unwisely initiated the Paraguayan War (1865 ? 79) , which crippled Paraguay , reduced its population by half , and forced many others into exile , creating a Paraguay that Roa Bastos described as " the land without men of the men without land . "

In the twentieth @-@ century , Paraguay was dominated by the dictatorial figure of Alfredo Stroessner , who ruled the country for thirty @-@ five years (from 1954 to 1989) and was in power at the time at which Roa Bastos was writing I , the Supreme . Roa Bastos 's novel can be perceived as in part a thinly disguised attack on Stroessner , who ruled Paraguay even longer than Francia .

He came to power after the 1947 Civil War , which had destroyed all parties of the centre and the left and drove more than a third of Paraguay 's population into exile . He assumed presidency after a series of coups in 1954 . He gained complete control of the military , eliminated potential rivals , and closely monitored and participated in allocations of national resources . As Deiner argues , " The novel ? s *El Supremo* (Francia) and Stroessner in the twentieth century used similar methods for dominating national politics . Neither tolerated effective opposition . Both rulers were extremely suspicious of any potential opponents , quickly acting to imprison and torture anyone suspected . Both were ruthless in their intolerance of dissent . " As Rowe and Whitfield describe Stroessner 's rule , " he inherited all Francia 's despotism , but none of his populism [. . .] he rule [d] over a country where human and civil rights are honored only in their breach . "

= = Influences = =

Literary critic Todd Garth argues that *I , the Supreme* is influenced by twentieth @-@ century Argentine writer Macedonio Fernández , as well as other avant garde artists such as Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar . Garth suggests that Macedonio and Roa Bastos are similar in use of metaphysical language and techniques used to reconstruct reality , as Dr. Francia does in his dictated creation of the Supreme , the ruler of all reality . Macedonio 's writing utilized characters that did not fit the archetype of Western fiction , each only having meaning through their interaction with others in a collective and often never experiencing growth or development in order to construct atemporal spaces of mythmaking that challenge reality . Roa Bastos borrows from these ideas yet situates them in existing political and social history to challenge perceived conceptions of the past 's factuality . He dismantles national Paraguayan mythology which is so intimately intertwined with the life of Dr. Francia , elucidating the distinctions between mythic and mythological . The novel can only accomplish this task within the metaphysical space of mythmaking . Whereas Macedonio attacks the concept of the individual as subject while admitting the fact that to write makes oneself a subject , Roa Bastos recognizes this paradox and exploits it , utilizing it in concerns of political and social nature .

Themes from Plato and his influence on Western political philosophy are also prevalent in the novel . Mainly , the debate over the nature of ' Good Society ' and how to achieve it are seen in the positions of the Supreme . He argues that it is the ruler 's role , as well as his duty and obligation , to bring about the good society , and this can only be done by the imposition of absolute order from above . The dictator ? s job is to bring about the Good Society , to impose the needed order , and the people 's job is to obey the dictator , thereby enjoying the fruits of the good society . The result of such behavior by both the ruler and the ruled will be good for everyone .

The novel is also clearly influenced by earlier writing on dictatorship , predominantly Domingo Sarmiento 's *Facundo* . The similarities can be seen in how both novels are written by exiles , in their thinly veiled attacks on their homeland 's current dictator , and in their authors ' shared use of ' pasquinade / hand @-@ written message ' devices to begin both novels . Francia 's " Perpetual Circular " also contains several allusions to the Argentine gaucho Juan Facundo Quiroga , as well as to the dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas , both of whom were the object of Sarmiento 's critique .

= = Genre = =

I , the Supreme is a good example of the dictator novel , a genre of Latin American literature that challenges the role of the dictator in Latin American society . The dictator novel draws upon the relationship between power , writing , and dictatorship , and so is an allegory of the role of the Latin American writer in society .

The goal of the dictator novel is not to dissect and to analyze the rule of particular dictators with a focus on historical accuracy , but rather , to examine the more abstract nature of authority figures , and to question the idea of authority in general . To be considered a dictator novel , a book must have strong political themes that draw upon historical accounts , while critically examining the power held by an authoritarian figure , allowing the specific to explain the general . Although mostly

associated with the Latin American Boom of the 1960s and 1970s , " all fictional depictions of the Latin American ' strong @-@ man ' , it must be noted have an important antecedent in Domingo Faustino Sarmiento 's Facundo , a work written as a sociological treatise " .

Many dictator novels , including I , the Supreme belong to the Latin American Boom , a literary movement which began in the 1960s and 1970s , when the work of a group of relatively young Latin American novelists became widely circulated in Europe and throughout the world . The Boom novels were essentially modernist novels , which according to Pope , relied on superposition of different points of view , blurring time and linearity . He further notes , " linguistically self assured , it used the vernacular without apologies . " Other notable characteristics of the Boom include the treatment of both " rural and urban settings , " internationalism , an emphasis on both the historical and the political , as well as " questioning of regional as well as , or more than , national identity ; awareness of hemispheric as well as worldwide economic and ideological issues ; polemicism ; and timeliness . "

= = Synopsis = =

As critic John King notes , " it is impossible to summarize this extraordinary novel in a few lines . It incorporates the latest developments in linguistic theory and practice , talks of the arbitrariness and unreliability of language that purports to describe reality , rereads and comments upon the various histories and travelers ' accounts of Paraguay , ranges across the breadth of Latin American history , implicitly condemning Stroessner and debating with Fidel Castro , and exploring once again the gap between writer and reader . "

The book does , however , start by promising a linear narrative . It opens with the title words , set in a font designed to look like handwriting , heralding what appears to be an official order :

I the Supreme Dictator of the Republic

Order that on the occasion of my death my corpse be beheaded ; my head placed on a pike for three days in the Plaza de la República , to which the people are to be summoned by the sounding of a full peal of bells ...

This pronouncement , it turns out , is not an official declaration . It is an imitation or forgery , found " nailed to the door of the cathedral " in Paraguay 's capital , Asunción . Immediately following , then , is a discussion of this pasquinade : Dr Francia , the Supreme , and his secretary , Policarpo Patiño , discuss its meaning and possible provenance . Patiño is set the task of uncovering the perpetrator : " You are to start tracking down the handwriting of the pasquinade in all the files . "

But this linear detection narrative soon starts to unravel . The Supreme casts doubt even on the presumption that the declaration is indeed a forgery , or rather suggests that the forgery could itself be forged : " Suppose that I myself am an author of pasquinades . " Moreover , the literary genre is undone by the introduction of footnotes (which blur the line between fiction and fact) , and the narrative transparency subverted by the fact that the novel asserts its own materiality with interpolations such as " (the rest of the sentence burned , illegible) " and " (edge of the folio burned) " . The effect of these notes is to remind readers that they are reading a book , and that this book is incomplete , damaged , and fallible .

As the novel continues , it becomes more and more caught up in digressions , such that the original narrative line is apparently forgotten . The Supreme and his secretary discuss an often bizarre series of topics : a meteor that is apparently chained to Francia 's desk ; a prison camp in Tevego whose inhabitants have been turned to stone ; and increasingly the dictator also ruminates on the past , particularly the events of Paraguay 's foundation when he had to fend off the attention of Spaniards , Argentines , and Brazilians , all of whom threatened the nascent country 's independence . Chronology and logic are seemingly abandoned : at one point the dictator discusses the date of his own death ; elsewhere he mentions events that will only happen long afterwards , such as the Chaco War of the 1930s (in which Roa Bastos himself fought) .

Moreover , readers are increasingly made aware of the marginal but insistent voice of the mysterious compiler . At the center of the book , it is revealed that the compiler is , in fact , in possession of the same pen used by the Supreme , a " memory @-@ pen " that reproduces images

as well as words , but that is now " partially broken , so that today it writes only with very thick strokes that tear the paper , effacing words as it writes them " .

The novel ends at the end of Francia 's life , with him condemning Patiño to death for supposedly plotting against him , followed by Francia 's death in a fire in 1840 . As the characters and plot disintegrate , so apparently does the novel . The final line is another interpolation : " (the remainder stuck together , illegible , the rest unable to be found , the worm @-@ eaten letters of the Book hopelessly scattered) . " And yet , this is not quite the last word , as it is followed by a " Final Compiler 's Note " that reflects on the compilation and the book as a whole . Here the novel seems to pass responsibility on to " the no less fictitious and autonomous reader . "

= = Characters = =

= = = Dr. Francia (the Supreme) = = =

José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia , also known as " Dr. Francia " , Karaí @-@ Guasú (" Great Lord " in Guaraní) , or " the Supreme " , is the book 's titular character and also undoubtedly its main focus . Most of the book is dedicated to his dictates to his secretary , Patiño . The Supreme is a domineering man , frequently belittling his closest confidant . He is also an infirm man , as the book is set a short time before his death on September 20 , 1840 . Roa Bastos 's portrayal of him walks the line between praise and condemnation . While other authors of dictator novels clearly present their dictators as villains , Roa Bastos makes it unclear as to whether he is defending him or not . As Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria writes , the Supreme is " constant [ly] [worried] about writing . [This] stems from the fact that he has found and used the power implicit in language itself . The Supreme defines power as being able to do through others what we are unable to do ourselves : language , being separate from what it designates , is the very embodiment of power . "

The Supreme is also revealed to be power @-@ crazed in other ways . Michiko Kakutani writes " Francia , it seems , wants to account for everything (his own history , as well as the history of his nation , which he personifies as its leader) as he pours out his story , it becomes clear that he possesses an insatiable desire for power and control ? he has even chained a huge meteorite to his desk , as punishment for being a cosmic runaway ? and that he also sees himself as two separate beings : as a conniving , paranoiac " I " , beset by the average ego 's fears and doubts , and as the " Supreme " , a monstrously powerful presence that even Francia himself must refer to in the third person . " The Supreme was personally involved in the affairs of the state to such extent , that it was reported by contemporary press that " [He] personally trained his cavalry in the use of the saber , ascertained the exact number of nails in Fort Orange , awarded 102 pesos to a Frenchman whose anchor had been melted down by the state ... lowered the price of salt in the capital , donated state yerba to the people of Saladillo , and denied permission for [someone] to marry in Villa Rica . " It was common for him to attend to such specific details in a single evening .

= = = Policarpo Patiño = = =

Policarpo Patiño is the Supreme 's secretary and amanuensis . An " efficient and loyal servant " , in historian Hoyt Williams 's words , he was " a jack of all trades , [who] arranged audiences , transcribed documents , visited the jails , and conferred with the Dictator on most routine matters . Toward the end of [the Supreme 's] life , and presumably with his knowledge , Patiño began signing some official documents that did not bear his master 's signature . " Much of the book consists of dialogue between the Supreme and his secretary , which Policarpo records as he writes what is dictated to him . In Roberto González Echevarría 's words , " Patiño is the quintessential writer . " There is , however , some debate about how powerful Patiño actually was . Initially possessing a more powerful role , the Supreme 's " personal control over virtually the entirety of [the state] " led to Patiño quickly being demoted from " Government Secretary and scribe " to simply a record keeper . There is evidence , however , that Patiño wielded considerable influence with the

Supreme , as " in 1835 Patiño denounced a slave for attempting to induce an abortion in his daughter and to poison him . A close investigation ... turned up [that] the daughter had requested the abortion and Patiño had lied , [yet] he was not jailed , and retained his powerful position . ?

Despite his influence , Patiño is frequently the victim of the Supreme 's abuse , even having his own death sentence dictated to him , although in the end he outlives his master . González Echevarría questions whether Patiño " [had] the last laugh ? Did he achieve some sort of posthumous power ? " This is suggested both because he outlived Dr. Francia , and also because the pen ostensibly used to write the book was given to the author by Patiño 's descendant . Therefore " the editor , who arranges the various texts and annotates them , who thereby exercises final authority over Dr. Francia 's versions of himself , is the heir of Policarpo Patiño . " The power relationship between the Supreme and his secretary is a microcosm of the book as a whole , with Dr. Francia dominating Patiño completely , even though the latter is intimately associated with the dictator having power at all , given the power he derives from writing .

= = Style = =

I , the Supreme is a dense , complicated novel that requires considerable reader involvement . Critic Helene Weldt @-@ Basson suggests that symbolism plays an important role in the novel , one that goes hand @-@ in @-@ hand with the complexity of the writing . She references Tzvetan Todorov 's theory of symbolism in literature which suggests that " [there is an] inseparability of symbolism and interpretation . They are , for me , simply two aspects of a single phenomenon . " This theory dovetails quite well with the multiple meanings associated with different objects in I , the Supreme .

Although the novel is a dialogue between the Supreme and his secretary , Patiño , there are in fact at least six different types of narration in the text : notebook entries , transcriptions of dialogues , a logbook , the " voice " of the Supreme 's father , two documents , and the installments of the perpetual circular , which is ostensibly the main project Patiño and Dr. Francia are working on . In addition to these different layers of narrative , there are also three possible authors : Roa Bastos , the author @-@ compiler , and the " implied author " . The latter refers to the " behavior , attitudes , and backgrounds [. . .] necessary for a proper understanding of the text . " The multitude of possibilities regarding the author and the shift between types of narratives , combined with an absence of quotation marks , contribute to this book being described as " undoubtedly , [the author 's] most complicated work to date . "

Further complicating matters is the fact that the Supreme 's " voice echoes back and forth in time ? recalling his birth and his youth , only to jump ahead to the future , speaking [from] beyond the grave about the flies that disturb his corpse , the bandits who dare to disturb his sleep . "

I , the Supreme is mostly composed of real texts by or about Francia . These range from personal memoirs by historical Paraguayan figures to passages from books written by Europeans in Paraguay at the time . They are arranged by a ' Compiler ' whose footnotes tell the story of how the book was put together . The body of the novel is composed of a polemical collection of versions of Paraguayan history . The first text is what the Supreme dictates to his assistant Patiño , about what is happening in the present . This includes the constant abuses Francia heaps upon Patiño and their attempts to discover the authors of a pasquinade , found nailed to the door of the Asunción Cathedral , that falsely announces Francia 's death and burial arrangements . It is mostly Francia 's vulgar rambling , including accusing meek Patiño of attempting to usurp him . The author of the pasquinade is never discovered in spite of their high scrutiny .

The second text is the " Circular Perpetual " that Francia also dictates to Patiño . It is his version of the origins of Paraguayan history , particularly of how he came to power . These texts are highly annotated by the editor , for in them Francia " corrects " versions given by other historical figures , not to mention those given by European travelers .

Finally , there is what Francia writes himself in his " Private Notebook , " which is mostly an account of his own life , attempts to write fiction , diatribes against Patiño and his kind , philosophical musings and ramblings , and other sundry exercises . All of these texts have been edited , for one

finds in them , besides the footnotes , indications in italics and within brackets such as " on the margin it is written , " " there is a hole in the paper here , " etc . So that while they do not compose a homogeneous text , held together by the rhetorical power of a narrative voice , and in fact are anything but homogeneous , these texts bear the presence of the editor in these discrete marks and indications .

= = Themes = =

= = = Language = = =

The novel revolves around a central theme of language ? written and spoken , truth and myth ? and the power inherent in all of its forms , a power that is often only present in the deconstruction of communication . González Echevarría argues that " Dr. Francia 's fear of the pasquinade , his abuse of [Patiño ,] his constant worry about writing all stem from the fact that he has found and used the power implicit in language itself . The Supreme defines power as being able to do through others what we are unable to do ourselves : language , being separate from what it designates , is the very embodiment of power , for things act and mean through it without ceasing to be themselves . Dr. Francia has also realized that he cannot control language , particularly written language , that it has a life of its own that threatens him . "

The significance of linguistic domination is present in the novel . Paraguay is the most bilingual country in Latin America where , as of 1962 , 52 % spoke the indigenous language Guaraní as well as Spanish , only 5 % only spoke Spanish , whereas 43 % spoke only Guaraní which is essentially a language of oral culture . As Roa Bastos claims , " this inevitably leads the Paraguayan writer to the necessity of creating a literature that goes beyond literature , of speaking against the word , or writing against writing . " At the time of I , the Supreme the majority of the people spoke Guaraní while Spanish was the dominant political language . Francia himself was known for his support of Guaraní and his " persecution of the Spanish @-@ speaking elite " . As Deiner argues , " El Supremo is aware of the difficulties of incorporating rural and underclass Paraguayans into the national political system , even though he is sympathetic toward them . But the common person , the Guaraní speaker , remains unheard . Roa Bastos cleverly demonstrates this political isolation / marginalization by constantly introducing Guaraní phrases , phrases which are incomprehensible to most readers , phrases from a spoken , not written language . The phrases are there in a sort of ghostly form , hanging in air , denying full participation in the novel to the reader , and thus causing the reader to empathize with real world Paraguayan citizens who are denied political participation by their political rulers . "

= = = Power = = =

The novel 's format , its various multiple sources , its manipulation of linear time and its inclusion of supernatural elements (talking dogs and meteor rifles , for example) all serve to deconstruct the idea of absolute power , by creating an ambiguity between fact and myth , between Dr Francia and the Supreme , and between Roa Bastos and the Compiler . Francia places himself above all power and history : " I don 't write history . I make it . I can remake it as I please , adjusting , stressing , enriching its meaning and truth . " Yet in the Compiler 's notes and retelling of events , the novel is presented as a genuine version of history , one that contradicts and questions the Supreme 's . In their collectivity , they deny the illusion of absolute power , whether the power is that of Francia the dictator or Roa Bastos the writer . This ambiguity between myth and fact is elaborated on at the end of the novel in the fictional debate over the Supreme 's remains ; it questions the nature of national political myth , and how heroes and villains are created in it and where the Supreme falls into those categories after being portrayed as both by Roa Bastos . As Deiner poses the question raised by the novel , " Is he to be portrayed as a valiant leader who held the country together in the face of enormous external aggression , or as a despot who laid the basis for almost two centuries of

exploitation of Paraguay ? s peoples by its leaders ? " The answer is not so much of importance to the novel , so much as the fact that the question itself exists , thereby confirming the power of writing over so called " absolute " power .

On a more basic level , the novel also has political themes to it . As John Deiner writes , " I , The Supreme is a surprisingly political novel . It is a commentary on Paraguay 's first great political leader [. . .] and a condemnation of the country 's last , General Alfredo Stroessner . " Deiner contends that the political system and occurrences in I , the Supreme are symbolic of those of other Paraguayan leaders . Suggesting the book is connected to more recent leaders of Paraguay , Deiner writes " although ostensibly a fictionalized account of the life of El Supremo , the novel is also a thinly disguised attack on the politics and rule of Alfredo Stroessner , [the dictator] ruling Paraguay at the time I , the Supreme was published (in exile) in 1974 . " In summary , Deiner suggest that the novel " serves as the quintessential example of the personalist dictator model of Latin American political systems . Francia 's was one of the earliest versions of this model , and Stroessner 's was one of the last personalist dictator regimes . "

= = Reception = =

Gerald Martin observes that " the publication of I the Supreme in 1974 was an exceptional cultural phenomenon . " He goes on to note that Roa Bastos 's novel " was more immediately and unanimously acclaimed than any novel since One Hundred Years of Solitude , and critics seemed to suspect that its strictly historical importance might be even greater than that of García Márquez 's fabulously successful creation . "

The Stroessner government did not react kindly to this or others of Roa Bastos 's writings . On a rare visit to Paraguay from France in 1982 , he was denounced as a " Marxist subversive " and became " one of the three citizens forbidden to return . "

Outside Paraguay , Roa Bastos 's works never became best @-@ sellers like those of other members of the Boom such as Gabriel García Márquez or Mario Vargas Llosa , yet as a recognition of his literary prestige he was awarded the Miguel de Cervantes Prize in 1989 . This is the most prestigious literary award in the Spanish @-@ speaking world , and honors the lifetime achievement of an outstanding writer in the Spanish language .

And in the English @-@ speaking world , the British critic Bernard Levin said about reading I , the Supreme upon its translation in 1986 that " he had read the book with an exhilaration similar to ' climbing Everest twice in one weekend . ' " Michiko Kakutani , writing for the New York Times , also remarked in that year that " however cumbersome and rhetorical I The Supreme may often feel , the novel remains a prodigious meditation not only on history and power , but on the nature of language itself . "

Also in 1986 Carlos Fuentes , for the New York Times , wrote of Roa Bastos : " He is his country 's most eminent writer ; his works are few , self @-@ contained (very Paraguayan) and brilliantly written . Yet his masterpiece , I the Supreme , which first came out in Spanish in 1974 and finally reaches the English @-@ reading public now , in a masterly translation by Helen Lane , is the kind of summa that absorbs everything that the writer has done before . This is Mr. Roa Bastos ' dialogue with himself through history and through a monstrous historical figure whom he has to imagine and understand if he is ever to imagine and understand himself and his people . "

About the 12 year delay between the book 's initial publication in Spanish and its translation into English , Fuentes reports that Roa Bastos said : " The book has been published in almost all the principal languages of the world , including Japanese and Chinese . [. . .] In Europe , it has only not been translated into Finnish and Albanian . " He also stated that " he was intrigued that Americans ' would start with the work of mine considered the most difficult . ' "