

**Rising from the Swamp: The Philosophical Implications of the
Dictator Novel**

by

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ABSTRACT

RISING FROM THE SWAMP: THE PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE DICTATOR NOVEL

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This thesis explores relationships between the modern Latin American dictator novel and the Western philosophical tradition. The dictator novel, as this thesis demonstrates, is a valuable tool for understanding authoritarian political systems as they have evolved in the West and as they have generated new literary forms. The twofold aim of the thesis is to show that 1) a text need not be “European” to contribute meaningfully to philosophical discourses addressing the politics of absolute power, and 2) that literary texts can amplify and distill philosophical debates on authoritarianism in productive ways. The recent trend toward authoritarianism worldwide has made thinking about the dictator novel more relevant, especially as democratic countries experience increasingly outward displays of authoritarianism tied to elite and oligarchic self-interest.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this text to my cousins, Stephen and Andrew—two people who have continued to challenge me throughout my life and without whose support I could not do what I do.

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1 Introduction: The Hope of Literature

The term “philosophical novel” is often employed in reference to the European philosophical and literary traditions. While there are antecedents, particularly in the Islamic world,¹ the most famous philosophical novels arise during the Enlightenment era with the likes of Voltaire—and the tradition continues into the 19th and 20th centuries with the likes of Dostoyevsky and Albert Camus. This thesis focuses on Augusto Roa Bastos’s novel *I the Supreme* (*Yo El Supremo*) as a representative of the dictator novel tradition in Latin America. It is my contention that the dictator novel genre is not exclusively an aesthetic tradition but also a philosophical one that engages with many of the core concepts that philosophers focus on in their work.

One reason I chose Roa Bastos’s novel is because he employs Guaraní, the Indigenous language of Paraguay. While many philosophers are willing to accept Dostoyevsky’s and Camus’s novels as philosophically important, they are less likely to be comfortable with a novel by a Paraguayan that uses the traditional language of his country alongside a European language. It is my contention that the novel’s engagement with Indigenous aesthetics enhances its philosophical power even when viewed from a Western Eurocentric perspective. The novel also engages with concepts that are typically seen as the domain of philosophy. Readers of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard may at first find the philosophical ideas expressed idiosyncratic. Roa Bastos, however, straddles two traditions. He was a reader of Nietzsche, who, at the same time, created literature that

¹ I have in mind Ibn Tufail, the writer of *Philosophus Autodidactus*, and an Arab philosopher from Andalusian Spain.

gave voice to the Indigenous traditions of Paraguay. The result is a hybrid text in the tradition of the philosophical novel but with distinctive features wholly its own.

I begin the thesis by giving the reader a broader conception of the dictator novel via a generalized genealogy. The works covered in this section are by no means exhaustive. Section two addresses the historical background of the dictator novel and provides the reader with a sense in which novels are important within the genre alongside Augusto Roa Bastos's *I the Supreme*. The next section, entitled "The State as a Form of Artifice," proceeds by undermining the idea introduced by John Stuart Mill that government is a type of machine.² Mill, an important figure in the development of political liberalism, in his work *Considerations on Representative Government*, uses the machinic metaphor to describe the state, making the comparison in the following passage:

We may consider, then, as one criterion of the goodness of a government, the degree in which it tends to increase the sum of good qualities in the governed, collectively and individually, since, besides that their well-being is the sole object of government, their good qualities supply the moving force which works the machinery.³

The machine metaphor is referenced throughout *Considerations on Representative Government*, even as Mill does believe in public participation in government. Mill was not an authoritarian in the nineteenth-century context. In fact, he encourages active and robust public participation in governance, with the caveat that authorities set the parameters for involvement. It attempts to aid the argument by giving

² John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³ Ibid. 30.

the reader an alternative vision of the state, by arguing for the linguistic and aesthetic structures that aid the state in maintaining its authority.

I then proceed to argue why storytellers should be considered serious philosophical thinkers, an idea that runs contrary to many of the ideas found in Plato's *Republic*. I then move on to consider the artistic status of the dictator novel. One can imagine a novel being political without it having much artistic merit. This is not the case with the novels in the dictator novel tradition. Some of them, like Alejo Carpentier's⁴ *Reasons of State*, and *The President* by Miguel Ángel Asturias⁵, are among the most outstanding works to be produced during their various periods. Section six focuses on philosophical statements made in *I the Supreme* and how they relate to the philosophy of language found in Wittgenstein. The final section of the thesis examines how modern dictators have an apparent power almost approaching divinity from which humanity is supposed to have been emancipated.

The major impetus for writing this thesis, other than the gap in the literature concerning the dictator novel genre as a philosophical tradition, is the contemporary political landscape. From Hungary to China to the United States, many leaders with authoritarian instincts have seized power and are making the world increasingly unstable. If anything can be gathered from this thesis, I hope that it is the idea that as long as leaders such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, and Xi Jinping remain in power, there will

⁴ Alejo Carpentier was a Cuban novelist and musicologist in the 20th century.

⁵ Miguel Ángel Asturias was a Guatemalan novelist and diplomat. He was also a Nobel Prize winner in literature.

not only be an assault on political values but also attacks of an epistemological and moral character on our notions of truth. Our concept of reality, such as the idea of truth and verification will be altered. The dysfunctional societies depicted in Latin American dictator novels, many of which have authoritarian systems due to the intervention of the United States government, reveal the frightening reality of despotism through fictional constructs that nonetheless carry truths about authoritarian power structures.

At the beginning of his *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno, the 20th century German philosopher makes his famous remark that “It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.”⁶ The status of art is perhaps more precarious now than when Adorno was writing. There is not the same amount of reverence for art as there used to be, just as reverence appears to be lacking temperamentally in us all. Our times are characterized by a lack of authentic sincerity, at both an individual and social level. Even the most terrible aspects of human existence take on a comic tone for some people. One need only take a cursory glance at the political landscape to realize that most of its actors lack earnestness—we are constantly at play and perhaps nowhere as much as in the realm of political discourses aligned with authoritarianism. Where the work of art may be helpful in a contemporary setting is in recovering a sense of seriousness. There is an element of sadism in contemporary political discourse that allows us to find comedic pleasure in the suffering of our enemies. It is perhaps possible that they deserve scorn, and scorn may

⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Bloomsbury Revelations (Bloomsbury, 2013) 1.

well be a positive thing in some cases. It is the lack of seriousness with which we treat them—and, indeed, the flippant attitude with which we treat *all* matters of culture—that makes it difficult for art to thrive, especially when it has been appropriated in the service of state authority.

Nothing is self-evident anymore due to the fact that the artist has been eclipsed by the showman. Donald Trump's shambolic rallies fulfill a function once reserved for aesthetic contemplation and religious observation. We have no reward mechanism for people who dedicate themselves to humanistic study. On the other hand, if you engage in self-promotion, frivolousness, and demonization of your neighbor, you may become the president of the United States. I do not want to be overly polemical, but the fact of the matter is that cultural incentive structures, under the demands of contemporary capital, do not allow for art to flourish in a meaningful way. Picasso and Manet have paintings that were once aesthetic objects and are now instruments of money laundering. The relationship of the artist to capital has become a parasitic one. For this reason, I will argue that of the arts, literature has the most revolutionary potential. Books and manuscripts are bought and sold like other commodities, but my access to them is not as hindered financially as it is for paintings, cinema, and other high art forms like opera and the symphony.

Another advantage of literature is that its concepts are more easily grasped than those of sculpture or painting. The visual arts require much more training to "read" complex visual semiotics than a standard literary work. This is not to say that literature is lesser than, or not as challenging. Rather, the forms of analysis proper to literary works

are more intuitive and rooted in language systems that all humans learn from an early age. These factors also give literature an advantage over more formal theoretical discourses such as philosophy because the style is less polemical. The redeeming value of art, I would like to advance, is the fact that though it may be useless, or perceived as such, it nonetheless provides a model of what it means to stand outside of capital. Regardless of the political persuasion of the writer, a true work of art has a non-monetary, intangible value that other spheres of society can only hope to emulate. There is, however, a problem with art, as Adorno identified:

For absolute freedom in art, always limited to a particular, comes into contradiction with the perennial unfreedom of the whole. In it the place of art became uncertain. The autonomy it achieved, after having freed itself from cultic function and its images, was nourished by the idea of humanity. As society became ever less a human one, this autonomy was shattered. Drawn from the ideal of humanity, art's constituent elements withered by art's own law of movement. Yet art's autonomy remains irrevocable. All efforts to restore art by giving it a social function—of which art is itself uncertain and by which it expresses its own uncertainty—are doomed.⁷

What Adorno is expressing here is that art was once tied to theological and humanistic discourses but has broken free from nearly all of its formal constraints and has, therefore, no foundations on which to stand. Art is a sphere of society that experiences true freedom, but the freedom does not appear to have any chance of being replicated outside of the artistic sphere. Adorno is quite negative about this aspect of modern art. He continues on to say:

Indeed, art's autonomy shows signs of blindness. Blindness was ever an aspect of art; in the age of art's emancipation, however, this blindness has begun to predominate in spite of, if not because of, art's lost naïveté, which, as Hegel

⁷ Ibid. 1.

already perceived, art cannot undo. This binds art to a naïveté of a second order: the uncertainty over what purpose it serves. It is uncertain whether art is still possible; whether, with its complete emancipation, it did not sever its own preconditions. This question is kindled by art's own past. Artworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this other world too were an autonomous entity. Thus, however tragic they appear, artworks tend a priori toward affirmation. The clichés of art's reconciling glow enfolding the world are repugnant not only because they parody the emphatic concept of art with its bourgeois version and class it among those Sunday institutions that provide solace. These clichés rub against the wound that art itself bears. As a result of its inevitable withdrawal from theology, from the unqualified claim to the truth of salvation, a secularization without which art would never have developed, art is condemned to provide the world as it exists with a consolation that—shorn of any hope of a world beyond—strengthens the spell of that from which the autonomy of art wants to free itself.⁸

As can be grasped from the quote, Adorno believes that art separated from theology has not achieved its revolutionary potential. He describes art as blind and questions the possibility of art in times that are not humane. Getting rid of the religious superstructure of art may have made the conditions for art impossible. Indeed, he may be right in the specific case of literature because it seems that when compared to other arts it may be floundering in terms of interest on the part of the public.⁹ Most contemporary literary fiction does not grip the public in the same way authors have in the past, in the United States. This apparent loss of influence is not due to a lack of talent on the part of contemporary writers, but rather is due to a shifting of conditions around them. If we are to get out of an era of despotism that seems to be approaching, we must recover a sense of life that exists

⁸ Ibid. 2.

⁹ Caleb Crain, "Why We Don't Read, Revisited," *The New Yorker*, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/why-we-dont-read-revisited>.

outside of utilitarian demands that serve commodification, nihilism, and political economies based on destroyer authoritarianism.

2 A Genealogy of the Dictator Novel

An entire history of the dictator novel would require a few volumes. Since this is not a possibility, I have condensed the history of this genre into a few important genealogical signposts. Except for Ramón Valle-Inclán's novel, the texts mentioned are not dictator novels, in and of themselves, and do not even purport to be fictional. Regardless of what they are described as, they are probably equal to Valle-Inclán's work in terms of fictional content due to what they get wrong concerning historical records. The aim of this chapter is not simply to narrate a few moments in the dictator novel. It is to show that literary representation is often a key ancillary to power. By this I mean that the way a dictator is portrayed literarily serves to extend or negate their power.

2.1 Francisco López de Gómara's *The Life of Cortés*

In what follows, then, I provide an overview of the dictatorship novel that has been developing since the beginning of Spanish literature in the Americas. As I state in my introduction the genre has its roots in historical and philosophical literature. Often, the aims of historians and novelists are said to be in opposition: the historian is said to deal in facts, the novelist in fiction. While we all know that this is overly reductive, we act as if the historian carries more weight than the novelist when it comes to truth-telling and the construction of narratives that are tied to "reality." The dictator novel genre, however,

severely problematizes this notion. The novels are often more historically accurate portraits than their precursors, which were composed as non-fiction texts. Gómara's portrait of Cortés, for instance, is a work of hagiography designed to make its subject look as presentable as possible. Lesley Byrd Simpson, an American hispanist, was attuned to this aspect of the work when he averred that he was "convinced that Gómara was consciously writing a prose epic and that virtually everything in the book was designed with this end in view."¹⁰ Gómara served as Hernán Cortés' secretary and scribe, so we should not expect an unbiased account from him. (This relationship between leader and scribe will become more familiar to us later in the thesis with novels such as *I the Supreme*, in which the Supreme Dictator dictates to his scribe Policarpo Patiño.) Even within his account, however, we can see Cortés' craven desire for power and the depraved lengths he will go to achieve it.

Gómara's book gives an account of Cortés' life from birth until death. He describes Cortés as a mischievous youth and writes that Cortés "was a source of trouble to his parents as well as to himself, for he was restless, haughty, mischievous, and given to quarreling."¹¹ The portrayal of Cortés as "haughty" may seem like a negative one, but I suspect it is done to emphasize his radical transformation into a man of virtue in adulthood. After the death of Cortés in the book, after we have been told of his many atrocities committed for the sake of the crown, Gómara gives us a portrait of

¹⁰ Francisco López de Gómara, *Cortés: The Life of the Conqueror by His Secretary* (University of California Press, 1964). xxii-xxiii.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 8.

Cortés as Cortés himself would like to be seen: “Hernán Cortés was of good stature...He was very strong and courageous and skillful at arms. As a youth he was mischievous, as a man, serene; so he was always a leader in war as well as in peace...He was devout and given to praying; he knew many prayers and psalms by heart.”¹² The narrative is presented so that the reader comes away with the impression that Cortés is a good Christian man who paved the way for progress and civilization in the Americas. This does not mean that the author does not want us to fear his subject as well. For example, Gómara recounts an incident where Cortés puts down a mutiny within his ranks. Cortés was embroiled in a feud with another conquistador named Diego Velázquez. This is the point in the novel where Cortés begins to display the attributes of sovereignty that make this work a predecessor to the dictator novel.

Although Cortés is a subject of the Spanish king, in the New World he is able to exercise an authority that would seem impossible at home. As we learn from Achille Mbembe in his essay “Necropolitics,” “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.”¹³ Under this formulation, authoritarian politics is always tinged with the specter of

¹² Ibid.409-410.

¹³ Mbembe, A. 2003. “Necropolitics.” *Public Culture* 15 (1): 11–40.
<https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>.

death. Every dictator or tyrant, whether they are in the form of a conquistador or a *caudillo*¹⁴, will possess this power. When Cortés hears of the mutiny, he reacts quickly:

Cortés heard this talk[,] informed himself of who had started it, arrested the principals, and put them on board [a] ship... He seized many of the conspirators and took their statements, in which th[e]y [confess] it was all true. So after a proper [trial], he hanged Juan Escudero and the pilot Diego Cermeño, and had Gonzalo de Umbria, also a pilot, whipped, as well as Alonso Peñate...With this action Cortés made himself more feared and respected than before; and, in truth, [i]f he had been soft, he would never [have] mastered them.¹⁵

This action gives Cortés the taste for blood. Up until that point we are given an almost saintly figure, but his willingness to harm those whom he saw as impediments to the accumulation of power continues throughout the text. This incident only covers what he did to fellow Spaniards, let alone what he did to Indigenous people in Tenochtitlan. Our “hero” will commit atrocity after atrocity, and it will be narrated in the same tone. Every word of this text is directed at exalting Hernán Cortés.

2.2 Sarmiento’s *Facundo: Civilization or Barbarism*

Domingo Faustino Sarmiento an Argentine sociologist and historian, in his work *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism*, written in 1845, helps to begin a tradition of critiquing dictatorship in Argentina and in Latin America more broadly. This is not to say that he does not entertain views that are quite chauvinistic, though. For example, Sarmiento characterizes “civilization” as European and “barbarism” as Indigenous. With that said, his descriptions of Juan Facundo Quiroga have left an indelible mark on the

¹⁴ While there is no direct translation of *caudillo*, it is roughly the equivalent of “strongman” in English.

¹⁵ Francisco López de Gómara, *Cortés: The Life of the Conqueror by His Secretary* (University of California Press, 1964). 89-90

literature of the Americas. The text is also remarkably hard to classify, as is stated by Roberto González Echevarría:

Facundo is a book that is impossible to pigeonhole; it is a sociological study of Argentine culture, a political pamphlet against the dictatorship of Juan Manuel Rosas, a philological investigation of the origins of Argentine literature, a biography of the provincial *caudillo* Facundo Quiroga, Sarmiento's autobiography, a nostalgic evocation of the homeland by a political exile, a novel based on the figure of Quiroga; to me it is like our *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. Whatever one makes of the book, *Facundo* is one of those classics whose influence is pervasive and enduring and which is claimed by several disciplines at once.¹⁶

Facundo is a polemic against the then dictator of Argentina, Juan Manuel de Rosas. Most of the text is spent describing Argentine society as a whole, though, and the *caudillo* Facundo Quiroga is discussed more than Juan Manuel de Rosas.¹⁷ This is because Sarmiento believes that in order to understand the dictator Rosas, you must understand his predecessor Facundo Quiroga first. For Sarmiento, Facundo is a kind of specter, something that haunts the body politic of Argentina, due to his barbarism and base cruelty. Sarmiento writes:

Facundo has not died. He lives on in popular traditions, in Argentine politics and revolutions, in Rosas, his heir, his complement; his soul has moved into that new mold, one more perfect and finished, and what in him was only instinct, impulse, and a tendency, in Rosas became a system, means, and end. Rural nature,

¹⁶ Roberto González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative* (Duke University Press, 1998). 97.

¹⁷ Augusto Roa Bastos would use this method later. Roa Bastos in *I the Supreme* depicts the life of José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, but it also serves as an attack upon Alfredo Stroessner, the dictator of Paraguay from 1954 to 1989.

colonial and barbarous, was changed through this metamorphosis into art, into a system, and into regular policy, able to present itself to the world as the way of being of a people, incarnated in one man who has aspired to take on the airs of a genius, dominating events, men, and things. Facundo—provincial, barbarous, brave, bold—was replaced by Rosas, son of cultured Buenos Aires without being so himself.¹⁸

Another dimension of text pertains to its author. Sarmiento would eventually become the president of Argentina after the collapse of Juan Manuel de Rosas' regime. This fact should lead us to question the objectivity of his narrative. Is Facundo truly as barbarous as he is depicted within the text? There is no doubt that Facundo engaged in atrocities, but does the liberalism that Sarmiento advocates have its own downsides? According to Sarmiento, the American Indigenous culture lacked the tools for civilization, and he frequently makes orientalist remarks concerning "Asiatic"¹⁹ and "Arab"²⁰ cultures. At the same time, he views himself as a champion of classical liberalism and democracy. As some commentators have pointed out, however, the book does not easily permit interpretation. The scholar Diana Sorensen Goodrich writes that:

although there is general agreement about the importance of the book, and about its status as a classic there are deep disagreements about its interpretation and about the kinds of nation-building myths it promoted... To some, it is necessary call to join the developed world and draw from European civilization in order to

¹⁸ Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo : Civilization and Barbarism* (University of California Press, 2004). 31.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 49.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 53.

foster Argentine modernization. To others, it contributed to the insidious discourse on national inferiority.²¹

To deal with the work in all its facets is impossible. I will instead attempt to focus on some isolated aspects and how they make themselves pronounced in the dictator novel. Firstly, even though it is not technically a work of fiction, there is a strong aesthetic intention in the way it reveals the supposed events in Facundo's life. The narrative is full of suspense and drama and much like Plato in *The Republic*, it utilizes techniques from drama that are typically associated with fictional works. From the perspective of Sarmiento, however, he was attempting to write in order to conform with the scientific and social discourse of his time. A particularly important model for him is Alexis de Tocqueville. De Tocqueville was an important figure in French sociology during the 19th century. He is most famous for his work on democracy in the United States. Sarmiento writes:

South America in general, and the Argentine Republic above all, has lacked a Tocqueville who, previously equipped with a knowledge of social theory just as a scientist travels with barometer, compass, and octant, would have penetrated the interior of our political life as a vast field still unexplored and undescribed by science, and revealed to Europe and France, so eager for knowledge of new phases in the lives of different segments of humanity, this new way of being that has no well-marked or known precedent.²²

Sarmiento, with perhaps less nuance than de Tocqueville, attempts to provide a panoramic view of Argentine society. He is not simply concerned with the caudillo. He is

²¹ Diana Sorensen Goodrich, *Facundo and the Construction of Argentine Culture* (University of Texas Press, 1996).1.

²² Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo : Civilization and Barbarism* (University of California Press, 2004). 32-33.

also preoccupied with the society that gave birth to him. As will be a constant theme in his writing, he blames the lack of devolvement in Argentina on its “barbarous” culture, which has failed to emulate the Europeans. His theoretical perspective is similar to Montesquieu in that he attempts to incorporate how the climate and the geography contribute to certain kinds of political organizations. For example, Sarmiento writes:

Many philosophers, too, have thought that the plains prepare the way for despotism, in the same way that the mountains have lent support to the forces of liberty. This limitless plain, which from Salta to Buenos Aires and from there to Mendoza, for a distance of more than seven hundred leagues, allows enormous, heavy wagons to roll without meeting a single obstacle on roads where human hands have scarcely needed to cut down more than a few trees and shrubs, this plain constitutes one of the most notable features of the Republic’s interior physiognomy.

In his view, while the European races are superior, there is something about the climate that contributes to criminal behavior. He advances the view that the American races are idle and that this forced the Spanish to import African slaves. He also remarks that white Spaniards who lived there were not given to frenetic activity either due to the climate.²³ These types of arguments often lead to categorization based upon race within the text. This is important because the racial characterizations tinge the way that Facundo is depicted by Sarmiento. Sarmiento writes: “His anger was like that of beasts: the mass of his very black, curly hair would fall forward over his forehead and eyes in locks like the serpents of Medusa’s head, his voice would grow hoarse, and his gaze would turn into daggers.”²⁴ He is frequently depicted in animalistic terms. This bestial

²³ Ibid. 51.

²⁴ Ibid. 100.

motif will be picked up on by Mario Vargas Llosa in his novel *The Feast of the Goat*. Bestial representations of leaders have precedence in Western philosophical discourse prior to Facundo both in literary and pictorial works. For example, in *The Allegory of Good and Bad Government*, a painting by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, the tyrant is depicted with horns. This is also a trope found in theological documents. In the book of Revelations, the forces operating against God are depicted as bestial.

¹ And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names. ² And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And the dragon gave it his power and his throne and great authority. ³ One of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound^[a] had been healed. In amazement the whole earth followed the beast. ⁴ They worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

It is useful to remember that Sarmiento is writing for a largely European audience. The book would not make it to Argentina due to Juan Manuel de Rosas' censorship program. In order to appease the European audience, he presents the caudillo, not as a continuation of European strongmen that have existed in Latin America since the conquistadors, but rather as representatives of Asiatic and Indigenous barbarism. Sarmiento truly wishes to paint Facundo and his successor Rosas as antichristian figures.

2.3 Ramón del Valle-Inclán's *Tyrant Banderas*

Ramón del Valle-Inclán is an author from Spain and not Latin America. He is, however, very important in the history of the dictator novel because he is the first to self-consciously make the dictator the subject of a work of fiction in the 20th century. In

Tyrant Banderas, the tyrant is the main character and chief antagonist (or protagonist, depending upon your perspective). The novel is closer to later works such as *I the Supreme* by Augusto Roa Bastos in that it is mainly concerned with depicting the dictator. The difference between Sarmiento's *Facundo* and Valle-Inclán's novel is that Valle-Inclán attempts to delve into the more human aspects of the dictator. Also, the dictator in Valle-Inclán's novel does not have a real-life counterpart. He is instead an amalgamation of Valle-Inclán's experiences in Latin America. Sarmiento depicts *Facundo* as an Asiatic beast, and Valle-Inclán is much more nuanced in that he attempts to show how dictatorship in Latin America is a continuation of Spanish imperialism. For example, one of Tyrant Banderas' adversaries says the following during a meeting of the opposition:

The Creolocracy retains all the privileges and protections of ancient colonial law. The liberators failed to destroy them. Our [I]ndigenous people suffer the slavery of indentured labor just as in the worst days of the viceroyalty. This America of ours has gained its independence from Spanish tutelage but not from Spanish prejudice, sealed with the stamp of these Pharisees: the law and the Catholic Church. The liberators failed to redeem the insulted and defenseless Indian working in mines and on landed estates, under the whip of the overseer.²⁵

The novel, as can be seen from the passage above, is not a dialectic between civilization and barbarism like *Facundo*; it rather seeks to give voices to Indigenous and non-European peoples within the text. In keeping with the tradition, the author does endow his dictator character with barbarous characteristics. For example, it said that Tyrant Banderas may have "a pact with the devil, he never sleeps, he has no intimate

²⁵ Ramón del Valle-Inclán, *Tyrant Banderas* (New York Review Books Classics, 2012).44

friends, he seems capable of the most incredible deeds.”²⁶ For most of the novel, we see Tyrant Banderas deal with a revolutionary insurgency, to which he ultimately succumbs. At the end of the novel, Tyrant kills his own daughter and is decapitated by the revolutionaries.²⁷ What is striking about the episode is the way in which he describes his own daughter:

Prowling as ever like a snoop rat, he went to the chambers where he'd shut up his own daughter. As he opened the door, he could hear her demented cries. He said, 'Dear daughter, you never married and never became the noble lady that this sinner meant you to be—this sinner who now must take away the life he gave you twenty years ago! It's hardly right you should stay in this world and be enjoyed by your father's enemies and that they should add insult to injury by calling you the daughter of that Banderas bastard!’²⁸

We learn later in the novel that he stabbed her fifteen times. The sovereign in this novel believes that he can exercise power over life and death—even if it is for those that are closest to him. There was no threat that the revolutionaries were going to harm his daughter; Tyrant had gone through a cycle of paranoia after he began to lose his grip upon power. After this gruesome incident, Tyrant essentially commits suicide by greeting the revolutionaries with a knife in his hand. What this novel illustrates is the paranoia and loneliness that encapsulate tyranny. It is slightly reminiscent of Xenophon's dialogue *Hiero or the Skilled Tyrant*. In this dialogue, Xenophon, another

²⁶ Ibid. x.

²⁷ Ibid. 199-200.

²⁸ Ibid. 199.

student of Socrates along with Plato, creates a dialogue between Hiero the tyrant and Simonides the poet. In it, Hiero, the melancholy tyrant, says:

But now I am deprived of people taking pleasure in me, since I have slaves instead of friends for companions, and am also deprived of taking pleasure myself in associating with these people, since I see in them no goodwill for me. Drunkenness and sleep I guard against like a snare. (4) To fear a mob, but to fear isolation too; to fear being unguarded, but to fear the very guards themselves; and to want not to have unarmed persons around oneself, yet not to contemplate with pleasure their being armed: how could this not be a troubling problem? (5) Further, to trust foreigners more than citizens, and barbarians more than Greeks; to desire to have the free as slaves, and be forced to make slaves free: do you not believe that all of these things are the marks of a soul terrified by fears?

In this dialogue, Hiero, the tyrant, discusses the disadvantages in his life due to tyranny, his own tyranny. What will become important during the later period of the dictator novel is how tyranny seems to engulf the tyrant. In some sense, the comparison to a beast is apt. The tyrant, once he begins to reflect, which he cannot do too often in order to uphold a certain self-image, becomes less than human due to paranoia and temperamental inconstancy. While the tyrants commit violence against others, the dictator novel is just as concerned with the violence the tyrant commits against himself.

3 The State as a Form of Artifice

The modern state is typically conceived as a technocratic affair²⁹ where each cog in the machine has a particular expertise that contributes to the functioning of the whole. What is often neglected in popular discussions about government is the chaotic nature

²⁹ John G. Gunnell, "The Technocratic Image and the Theory of Technocracy," *Technology and Culture* 23, no. 3 (July 1982): 392, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3104485>.

of state building. In an introduction to government course in the United States, you'll hear a lot about the minutiae of how bills are passed but not very much about the underlying ideological foundations of the state or how a given state is formed in the first place. Because we have for hundreds of years lived under the institution of "the state," its underlying, unexamined ideologies have become naturalized. This naturalization neglects how, historically, the state is a form of artifice, an ideological structure with profound ties to aesthetics.

Jacob Burckhardt the 19th century historian and the author from whom the title of this section originates, conceived the Italian city states of the 14th century in a decidedly non-technocratic manner. In his famous essay on the Renaissance, he argues that "as the majority of the Italian States were in their internal constitution works of art, that is, the fruit of reflection and careful adaptation, so was their relation to one another and to foreign countries also a work of art."³⁰ What Burckhardt meant by a "work of art" is that the state is the product of "reflection and calculation" in the aesthetic sense.³¹ I want, however, to make the assertion that the state in large part is the creation of the discourse surrounding it, by which I mean that the stories that we tell about the state

³⁰ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (Modern Library, 2000), <https://www.amazon.com/Civilization-Renaissance-Italy-Book-Classics-ebook/dp/B000FC1HBE>. Burckhardt, Jacob. *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy: (A Modern Library E-Book)* (p. 42). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

³¹ Ibid. Burckhardt

contribute to its creation, maintenance, and destruction. While I will focus on more overtly authoritarian regimes in this text, the same can be said for seemingly democratic states, or what we might now call managed democracies, where oligarchs rule in the name of increasingly concentrated structures of power. There is a discourse in which we all participate that contributes to the mythology of the state, and my particular interest in this thesis is on authoritarian state models and the novels that describe them.

Alejo Carpentier, in his book *Reasons of State*, makes the linguistic problem of the state clear. The original title of his work, *El Recurso del Método*,³² is a play on the title of Descartes' *Discourse on the Method*. The dictator of this novel, who is simply referred to as the "Head of State," runs into a crisis of language when his regime is beginning to experience difficulty maintaining authority over the populace:

But something else was perturbing the Head of State this time. And it was a problem of words. When he returned *over there*, before he again put on the general's uniform that everyone knew was phoney...he would have to make a speech, to utter words. And those words refused to come to mind, because the classical, fluent, serviceable words he had always used on former and similar occasions had been so often rehashed in different registers with corresponding pantomimic gestures as to have become worn out, old, and ineffective in the present contingency. Contradicted innumerable times by his actions, these words had passed from the marketplace to the dictionary, from fiery tirade to rhetorical repertory, from useful eloquence to an attic full of rubbish—devoid of meaning, dry, arid, useless.³³

The crisis of authority the dictator experiences is in part a failure of language, the "problem of words"; whether fortunately or unfortunately, material realities do not have

³² It is translated as A Recourse to Method.

³³ Alejo Carpentier, *Reasons of State*, Reprint Edition (Melville House, 2013).129.

the weight on public opinion that we would expect. It is also an occurrence of his sense of self collapsing; the sovereign in this type of system operates as a kind of actor and the person that is playing the role often is conflicted concerning the role's demands. To be clearer, authoritarianism, as portrayed by Carpentier and Roa Bastos, produces psychological instability in the person who rules. One theme I think will be clear from Roa Bastos's novel, one foreshadowed by Carpentier here, is that while dictatorship is bad for those who have to endure it, dictatorship is also bad for the dictator.

When a government responds adequately to a crisis without a coherent narrative to make sense of those actions, they can be exploited by the opposition. Likewise, an incompetent government may maintain power by affecting the discourse in a favorable way. Carl Schmitt, the most prominent authoritarian intellectual in the 20th century, would find my assertions to be an anathema. Schmitt was a political theorist and jurist under the Third Reich in Germany. Despite his heinous political activity, he is considered one of the most important commentators on the nature of the political in the 20th century. Schmitt does not emphasize the linguistic and aesthetic nuances of the political; instead, Schmitt creates arbitrary distinctions between fields of intellectual inquiry and attempts to define the core of most concepts in a dualistic manner.

A definition of the political can be obtained only by discovering and defining the specifically political categories. In contrast to the various relatively independent endeavors of human thought and action, particularly the moral, aesthetic, and economic, the political has its own criteria, which express themselves in a characteristic way. The political must therefore rest on its own ultimate distinctions, to which all action

with a specifically political meaning can be traced. Let us assume that in the realm of morality the final distinctions are between good and evil, in aesthetics beautiful and ugly, in economics profitable and unprofitable. The question then is whether there is also a special distinction that can serve as a simple criterion of the political and of what it consists. The nature of such a political distinction is surely different from that of those others.³⁴ For Schmitt, this “ultimate distinction” in the political is between friend and enemy.³⁵ While Schmitt’s thought is in many ways attractive in certain situations, such as when a scholar is attempting to understand fascist politics in parliamentary settings, his notions of the political, aesthetic, moral, and economic are extremely simplistic. Even during the 1920s when Schmitt was writing, most thinkers were questioning radically dualistic thinking. Most aestheticians during that century did not believe their discipline fundamentally consisted of the beautiful and the ugly. Schmitt is being overly polemical when creating his friend-enemy distinction and produces an epistemology worthy of the 15th century. While he is insightful in his critique of liberalism, particularly when he criticizes liberals for their inability to be decisive, many of his assertions are not well argued. My contention is that in many cases what is political is often spurred by aesthetic preferences, moral frameworks, and economic realities.

The state, ancient or modern, is in part the creation of a certain mode of discourse. The fact that some treat the dialogues of Plato or the discourses of

³⁴ Schmitt, Carl. *The Concept of the Political*. Expanded Edition. University of Chicago Press. Kindle Edition.

³⁵ Ibid. Schmitt.

Machiavelli with more reverence than we would an African or Latin American dictator novel, when the latter have compelling things to say about the nature of power, tells us something about our academic landscape. Yes, there are colonialist reasons for why this is the case, but I suspect it has a lot to do with the status of art more generally. Our technocratic approach to most problems, even in the university has led us to underestimate the power of discourse and narrativity generally. If there is anything that the contemporary far-right knows, it is that truth may be obscured by the fantastic. I am not advocating the abandonment of reason. The notion that art and reason are opposed is one of our Platonic bequeathments. I see no reason why art and literature cannot be an instrument of reason. In previous epochs, such as the late Renaissance and early Enlightenment, art was used to convey philosophical concepts and was not considered an enemy of reason or simply a fanciful endeavor.³⁶ This is not to suggest that art is simply an instrument of reason in the Enlightenment sense or that reason is the only valuable human function. The value of art in this case is that it contextualizes reason and shows its follies as well as its advantages.

4 Thinking with Literature: The Primacy of the Storyteller

When contemplating the building of the republic, Socrates begins not with electoral mechanisms or constitutional powers. Instead, he opts to begin his discussion of the perfect republic with the overseeing of storytelling. Plato writes in the voice of

³⁶ Susanna Berger, *The Art of Philosophy: Visual Thinking in Europe from the Late Renaissance to the Early Enlightenment*, 1st ed. (Princeton University Press, 2017).

Socrates: “We must first of all, it seems, supervise the storytellers. We’ll select their stories whenever they are fine or beautiful and reject them when they aren’t. And we’ll persuade nurses and mothers to tell their children the ones we have selected...Many stories they tell now, however, must be thrown out.”³⁷ The dictator novel is a form of protest against the indictment by Plato. The political philosopher, in his need for order, views the objects of literature as an anarchic force. Literature often eschews the direct messaging of politics, and engagement with the work of art requires a certain form of perception. As Adorno writes in his *Aesthetic Theory*:

All artworks—and art altogether—are enigmas; since antiquity this has been an irritation to the theory of art. That artworks say something and in the same breath conceal it expresses this enigmaticalness from the perspective of language. This characteristic cavorts clownishly; if one is within the artwork, if one participates in its immanent completion, this enigmaticalness makes itself invisible; if one steps outside the work, breaking the contract with its immanent context, this enigmaticalness returns like a spirit. This gives further reason for the study of those who are alien to art: In their proximity the enigmaticalness of art becomes outrageous to the point that art is completely negated, unwittingly the ultimate criticism of art and, in that it is a defective attitude, a confirmation of art’s truth. It is impossible to explain art to those who have no feeling for it; they are not able to bring an intellectual understanding of it into their living experience.³⁸

From Adorno’s perspective, those who are “alien to art,” such as Plato, are disturbed by it due to its enigmatic nature. In the perfect republic, such as Plato envisions, the supervision of aesthetic activity is required. This seems to be an element found in all societies where a form of authoritarianism has taken root. Unsurprisingly, Augusto Roa Bastos’s dictator novel *I the Supreme* is full of invective against the

³⁷ Plato, John M Cooper, and D S Hutchinson, *Complete Works* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997). Republic 377b-c.

³⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1998). 120.

storytellers and the writers. At the beginning of the novel, a message is left at a cathedral that reads:

Of what use are pasquinades? The most shameful perversion of the use of writing! What's the point in the spiderwork that pasquinaders weave? They write. Copy. Scribble. Cohabit with the wicked word. Plunge down the slope of wickedness. Sudden full stop. Death blow to their logorrhea. The avalanche of words meeting with a sudden quiet, the wordmongers with a sudden quietus. Not the full stop of a dot of black ink; the tiny black hole produced by a rifle cartridge in the breast of the enemies of the Fatherland is what counts. It admits of no reply. It rings out. The end. Finis.³⁹

A *pasquinade* is a form of literary satire, typically directed at a person in power.

The novel begins with a *pasquinade*, which announces the death of the Supreme, who is still alive. We learn later in the novel that the *pasquinade*, as the Supreme would say, was an elaborate ruse organized by the dictator himself to test his secretary Policarpo Patiño.⁴⁰ At the beginning of the novel, we are not aware that this is a hoax. Instead, the Supreme pretends to be genuinely shocked by the *pasquinade* found at the cathedral and blames it on two writers who presumably militated against Paraguayan independence from Argentina:

It is not wholly unlikely that those two sly scribble-scrabblers Molas and de la Peña were the ones who dictated this squib. The joke is altogether in the style of those two infamous Porteñista partisans, out to further the cause of Buenos Aires. If it is their doing, I shall immolate Molas, pen Peña in for life... Your Worship is more than right. In the light of what Your Eminence says, even the truth appears to be a lie. I'm not asking you to flatter me, Patiño. I'm ordering you to seek and find the author of the pasquinade.⁴¹

³⁹ Augusto Roa Bastos, *I, the Supreme*, 2nd Edition (New York: Vintage, 2019). 61-62.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 339.

⁴¹ Augusto Roa Bastos, *I, the Supreme*, 2nd Edition (New York: Vintage, 2019). 9.

The Supreme knows that he is the author, but he is constantly testing the abilities of his assistant and scribe. Their relationship is not unlike that of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Indeed, an unnamed commentator remarks in a *pasquinade* against the Supreme Dictator that the dictator would sometimes withdraw to write “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.”⁴²

Instead of art imitating life, the Supreme’s life imitates art—literary art, to be precise. At points, the Supreme’s character seems too fictional and too contrived to be that of a real human being. This is not the case, however. The Supreme is based upon the real dictator of Paraguay during the early 19th century, José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia—also known as El Supremo, or, in English, The Supreme. Although it is a novel, Roa Bastos draws upon many historical and contemporary documents in order to give life to the Supreme Dictator. The novel is extremely intertextual and makes reference to a myriad of Western authors, including Plato, Cervantes, the Marquis de Sade, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Due to the structural importance of these intertexts, the novel takes the form of a hypertext, which often includes citations to real works and notes from an imaginary compiler. By constructing the novel in this manner, Roa Bastos makes it clear that he wants us to read this novel in conjunction with what came before it.

⁴² Ibid. 79.

I am interested in the way in which this novel and others within the dictator novel genre fit into the broader political, philosophical, and literary traditions to which they belong. My study deviates from other studies on the dictator novel in that I view the genre as a form of direct engagement with political philosophy by the storytellers. While it may upset Plato, I think that the storytellers who engage with the dictator genre have much to say about the nature of good government. This is not to say that we will not treat the novels as aesthetic objects. Indeed, the aesthetic is of primary importance. What is it that can be communicated politically and philosophically in a novel that cannot be communicated by a standard treatise?

What is Dictatorship?

Roberto González Echevarría, a critic of Latin American literature, describes the dictator novel as “the most clearly indigenous thematic tradition in Latin American literature.”⁴³ My contention, in this paper, is that not only is it in some sense indigenous to Latin American narrative but iterations of it also occur in other societies, whether they take the form of the novel or not. As we learn from Efraín Kristal, “All fictional depictions of the Latin American ‘strong-man, ... have an important antecedent in Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s *Facundo* (1845), a work written as a sociological treatise.”⁴⁴ What should we expect from a literary genre that is derived from a treatise or work of political non-fiction? We should expect to be engaged politically in a way that is uncommon. In

⁴³ Roberto González Echevarría, *The Voice of the Masters* (University of Texas Press, 1985). 65.

⁴⁴ Efraín Kristal, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Latin American Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 2005). 10.

the Anglosphere, during the 20th century, the main political novel was Orwell's *1984*. One should not expect the dictator novel in Latin America, which is conditioned by a different set of historical experiences, to be like Orwell's masterpiece. These novels, at least the dictator novels that appear in the latter half of the 20th century, owe more to Joyce, Borges, and Proust stylistically than they do the traditional "political" novelist, and my thesis will explore these connections in close readings of specific dictator novels.

But before we can discuss the dictator novel in greater detail, some historical work is required. The tradition of the dictator is handed down to us by the framers of Roman Law. The word "dictator" is not used until Rome. Plato and the Greeks describe tyranny, which is a related concept, but for now, we will try to discuss the Civil Law tradition of Rome, from which many countries and Latin America derived their legal systems. The implementation of the Civil Law tradition in Latin America, of course, begins with Spanish imperialism. The most thorough account of dictatorship and its historical trajectory is provided by authoritarian Weimar philosopher Carl Schmitt. While he is an extremely dangerous thinker in many regards because of his association with fascism, he does provide a certain framework that will help us to understand what we mean when we say the word "dictator." As Schmitt states, in the Roman Republic the "dictator" was a constitutionally valid position that was held during a state of emergency for a limited amount of time:

The dictator was nominated for six months, but, whenever he had accomplished his mission, he stepped down before his official time of resignation—at least according to a commendable custom in early republican times. He was not bound by the law; he was a kind of king with absolute power over life and death...Usually dictatorship was seen as a political instrument by which the

patrician aristocracy sought to save its dominion against democratic claims made by the plebeians.⁴⁵

The dictator, for a brief period of time, had “power over life and death.” With that said, it was not until the dictatorships of Sulla and Caesar that the idea of dictatorship in our modern sense arises.⁴⁶ Schmitt also provides a linguistic definition of dictatorship in addition to his previous historical construction. “The linguistic importance of the word ‘dictatorship’—which led to its extension to all those cases in which one could say that an order is ‘dictated’ (*dictator est qui dictat*, ‘dictator is the one who dictates’) and to a use of language that undoubtedly contributed to the dissemination of the concept. “Dictate” also means “to say” or “to speak.” The political power is intertwined with linguistic power. Dictatorship is not simply a form of government but a form of linguistic expression. The “dictator is the one who dictates.” The words of a leader are transmitted into a command that must be obeyed. The linguistic apparatus that helps construct “dictatorship” in the modern sense is latent in the concept. This is perhaps why Plato and the Supreme value storytelling and the written word. With that being said, the dictator in the Roman context “was not a tyrant and dictatorship was not a form of absolute government, but rather an instrument to guarantee freedom.”⁴⁷ The dictator could make decisions quickly in order to save the republic. It was a position held when the Roman Republic faced an existential threat. While the Roman dictatorship was not as inhumane as its modern counterpart, it did have within it some ideological

⁴⁵Carl Schmitt, *Dictatorship*, 1st Edition (Polity, 2013). 2.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 2.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 4.

presumptions that the concept carries with it today. The primary one is that the elected government body cannot be left to make important decisions. Within it is the presumption that the mob is base and vulgar and not able to ascertain its own self-interest. Schmitt writes:

In every discussion that seeks to justify political or statal absolutism, the natural human inclination towards evil is postulated as an axiom, in order to justify the authority of the state. And, however different the theoretical interests of Luther, Hobbes, Bossuet, de Maistre and Stahl may have been, this argument appears significantly in all of them.⁴⁸

It is obvious, though, that under Julius Caesar, dictatorship takes on what it will become in its modern form. Lily Ross Taylor, in her work *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor*, writes: “It was in a world that thought of the absolute monarch as a god that Caesar developed his own supreme power after his victory at Pharsalus; and when he determined to have his power recognized by the establishment of a monarchy, it was as an essential feature of the monarchy that he sought his own divinity.”⁴⁹ In the Roman system, after the collapse of the republic and the birth of the empire, the god-king was created—a dual being similar to the medieval “king’s two bodies” found in Ernst Kantorowicz.

The story of the dictator in Latin America begins with the age of independence. There was the tyranny and barbarism of Spain prior, but it was not something that we

⁴⁸ Ibid. 6

⁴⁹ Lily Ross Taylor, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor* (Middletown, Conn., American Philological Association, 1931), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015020814813&view=1up&seq=7>.

would call “dictatorship.” While there are certainly antecedents to the caudillo prior, particularly Hernán Cortés, the triumph of the dictator begins roughly with the formation of the nation state. The standard account from John Merryman and Rogelio Pérez-Perdomo, in their study of the Civil Law tradition in Continental Europe and Latin America, is that the birth of the nation state coincided with a growth in the concept of sovereignty, which was inspired by the political thinkers Jean Bodin and Thomas Hobbes.⁵⁰ Merryman and Pérez-Perdomo write that:

Although there were variations in form and degree from nation to nation, the idea that law was of divine origin—whether expressed directly, as in divine (i.e. scriptural) law, or expressed indirectly through the nature of human beings as created by God, as in Roman Catholic natural law—had lost most of its remaining vitality.⁵¹

The decline in religious law and the embrace of positivism gives way to the “absolute sovereignty” of the prince.⁵² These concepts significantly mutate throughout history; however, one constant is that the dictator is typically perceived as being something more than human. Let me provide a concrete historical example from Lauren Derby’s work on Raphael Trujillo called *The Dictator’s Seduction*. This book makes explicit reference to Kantorowicz’s concept of the “king’s two bodies” in the text. She says that within the Dominican Republic, Trujillo possessed a “preternatural

⁵⁰John Henry Merryman and Rogelio Pérez-Perdomo, *The Civil Law Tradition: An Introduction to the Legal Systems of Europe and Latin America*, Fourth Edition (Stanford University Press, 2018). 20.

⁵¹ John Henry Merryman and Rogelio Pérez-Perdomo, *The Civil Law Tradition: An Introduction to the Legal Systems of Europe and Latin America*, Fourth Edition (Stanford University Press, 2018). 20.

⁵² *Ibid.* 21.

omnipotence.”⁵³ This was evident when, after Trujillo’s assassination, many Dominicans were unsure if he was able to “expire like a mere mortal.”⁵⁴ This is a trope, perhaps inherited from Caesar, which dictators have often engrained in the populace.

The Lettered City

We have clarified what is meant by dictatorship. The second order of business is to give a historical account of why Latin America gave rise to this literary genre, which is based on a political concept. Angel Rama, in his work *The Lettered City*, sketches a framework for understanding language and power in Latin America beginning with the conquests of Spain and Portugal until well into the 20th century. In a very peculiar manner, he begins his study with the construction of the city in the supposedly “New World.” “Latin American cities,” according to Rama, “have ever been creations of the human mind. The ideal of the city as an embodiment of social order corresponded to a moment in the development of Western civilization as whole, but only the lands of the new continent afforded a propitious place for the dream of the ordered city to become a reality.”⁵⁵ Rama informs that European architects described the new continent as a “blank slate” on which a form of experimentation could take place.⁵⁶ Urban planning

⁵³ Derby, Lauren, and Duke University. 2009. *The Dictator’s Seduction: Politics and the Popular Imagination in the Era of Trujillo*. Durham; London: Duke University Press. 205.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 205.

⁵⁵ Angel Rama, *The Lettered City* (Duke University Press, 1996). 1.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 2.

becomes a means to realizing the perfect city. Rama explains that many of these figures were inspired by Plato's *Republic*, writing:

The ideas of *The Republic*, revived by Renaissance humanism, arrived in America through the same Neoplatonist cultural channels that guided the advance of Iberian capitalism. And with Neoplatonic idealism came the influence of quasi-mythical Hippodamus, the Greek father of the ideal city—especially his 'confidence that the processes of reason could impose measure and order on every human activity.⁵⁷

These classical accounts of tyranny from the Ancient Greek world derive from two students of Socrates. The first one is much better known; it is Plato's description in *The Republic*. The second, which is not so well known, is by Xenophon. Both of these men are staunch opponents of democracy. What exactly are the ideas of *The Republic*? Rama is talking about how urban planning was encouraged by a reading of Plato and later by the Enlightenment philosophers. One important aspect of Plato's *Republic* is its description of tyranny. Plato's account of the tyrant is peculiar in that he begins it by talking about the "tyrannical man" or the characteristics of a person inclined toward tyranny. Plato describes roughly three characteristics of the tyrannical man.

The first description of the tyrannical man in *The Republic* by Socrates (who is often a conduit for Plato and the main narrative voice of the dialogues) involves an excess of erotic desire. "A man becomes tyrannical in the precise sense of the term when either his nature or his way of life or both of them together make him drunk, filled

⁵⁷ Ibid. 2-3.

with erotic desire, and mad.”⁵⁸ The second aspect of the tyrannical man is his lack of filial piety. Plato explains to his interlocutor Adeimantus:

But, good god, Adeimantus, do you think he'd sacrifice his long-loved and irreplaceable mother for a recently acquired girlfriend whom he can do without? Or that for the sake of a newfound and replaceable boyfriend in the bloom of youth, he'd strike his aged and irreplaceable father, his coldest friend? Or that he'd make his parents the slaves of these others, if he brought them under the same roof? / Yes, indeed he would. / It seems to be a very great blessing to produce a tyrannical son!⁵⁹

The third characteristic of the tyrannical man is a need for excessive self-aggrandizement. According to Socrates, the tyrannical man associates only with those who boost his ego and will “obey him in everything.”⁶⁰ He “lives his whole life without being friends with anyone, always a master to one man or a slave to another and never getting a taste of either freedom or true friendship.” Plato’s description of the tyrannical man will apply completely to the Supreme Dictator of Paraguay, but there is something the reader must be told. Plato is an enemy of democracy as well. Indeed, the only thing that he thinks is lower than democracy is tyranny. According to Plato, the five forms of government are: aristocracy, timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny. Aristocracy, according to Plato, is the highest form of government. In fact, many of the major philosophers in Western thought are to some degree anti-democratic. While I do not want to make a list of every anti-democratic philosopher, this would include Hobbes,

⁵⁸ Plato, John M Cooper, and D S Hutchinson, *Complete Works* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997). 1182

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 1184

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 1184

Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. As work done by Josiah Ober postulates, political philosophy reached maturity in Athens around the time that there was a growing dissatisfaction with democracy.⁶¹

The Athenian philosophical tradition is squarely at odds with the major practitioners of the dictator novel, who, whether they be liberal or socialist, believe in *some* form of democracy. We must remember that it was Athenian democracy that sentenced Socrates to death. Aristophanes, a prominent Greek storyteller, is often blamed for Socrates' death due to his unflattering depiction of him in his play *The Clouds*. While we should avoid general statements, in philosophy from Plato to Nietzsche there is a distrust of the mob. The dictator novel is radical in this respect. It engages with philosophy and politics to assert the primacy of the storyteller. Uncensored storytelling is one of the fundamental conditions of democratic practice—the ability to tell one's story without the fear of Platonic censorship. Plato is correct in his description of tyranny, but he fundamentally underestimates how aristocracy is a form of tyranny.

5 The Dictator Novel as a Work of Art

Most approaches to the dictator novel emphasize its overt political content. There are many good reasons for this. The dictator novel *is* a form of social and political

⁶¹Josiah Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

protest against tyranny. With that being said, the dictator novel is also an aesthetic tradition. Milan Kundera, in *The Art of the Novel*, criticizes Orwell for engaging in socio-political prophecy. Kundera does not criticize the ideological content to be found in the novel; rather, he says that even though his message was important, most of the content could have been expressed within a pamphlet.⁶² Kundera is not saying that novels should never be political, but he feels that they should articulate truth according to their form (I will explain what I mean by this later). The dictator novels, particularly those by the key figures of the Latin Boom, were often part of the artistic avant-garde of their time; however, this did not prevent the authors from believing that as writers they had social and political obligations. Theodor Adorno, in his essay on the narrator in the modernist novel, states that there is something that most modernist artworks have in common. Adorno writes that “these products fall outside the controversy over committed art and *l’art pour l’art*, outside the choice between the philistinism of art with a cause and philistinism of art for enjoyment.”⁶³ These novels do not present a choice between social commitment and aesthetic achievement. Instead, the political is infused within the aesthetic.

An Aesthetic Inquiry into the Dictator Novel, Part I: *I the Supreme*

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno states that “the task of aesthetics is not to comprehend artworks as hermeneutical objects...it is their incomprehensibility which

⁶² Milan Kundera, *Art of the Novel* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2003).12

⁶³ Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, Combined (Columbia University Press, 2019).58.

needs to be comprehended.”⁶⁴ Adorno is stating that artworks are not simply objects for the intellect to interpret. Within artworks is a revelatory dimension that is not easily perceived. With this statement in mind, we will attempt to understand Augusto Roa Bastos’s *I the Supreme*. What is its form trying to communicate to us? We could proceed by quoting the narrator’s theoretical statements alone and construct of positivistic theory of what the novel means. We could extract a political philosophy of the novel based on the various references to philosophers that are found in the novel. This, however, would make the work secondary. We would be reading it like a work of philosophy or a theoretical text. Instead, I want to treat it like a work of art that has something to communicate philosophically. In his reading of Proust, Vincent Descombes writes, “If it is true that the novel today is the form richest in *legomena*, in specimens of those common ways of thinking that are the raw material of practical philosophy, then philosophers have an enormous need for novels.”⁶⁵

Artworks, at their best, are not merely aesthetic demonstrations of philosophical or ideological ideas. They instead insist upon a language of their own. Roa Bastos’s novel presents some difficulties when trying to analyze it because it is not simply a novel. Like many works of the avant-garde, it is of a mixed form. The novel, the philosophical treatise, and the essay all coalesce in order to create this book. Like many original works, it aspires to create its form and through this it conveys its meaning. The

⁶⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997). 118.

⁶⁵ Vincent Descombes, *Proust: Philosophy of the Novel* (Stanford University Press, 1992). 10

first image that the dictator of *I the Supreme* gives us of himself is chimerical. By this, I mean he compares himself to the Greek monster composed of many animals. The Supreme in his first-person monologue says:

I've been well chewed and swallowed, as compadre Rabelais put it. The chimera has occupied the place of my person. I tend to be "the very image of the chimerical." A famous joke, that will bear my name. Look up the word "chimera" in the dictionary, Patiño. A false idea, a vain or foolish fancy, a fantastic creature of the imagination it says, Excellency. That's what I'm in the way of being, in reality and on paper. It also says, Sire: A fabulous monster with the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a dragon. They say that that's what I was.⁶⁶

While the Supreme is talking about his notion of selfhood, this could equally apply to the work of art. A novel is most certainly "a fantastic creature of the imagination." He says that it is his "wary of being" both as the Supreme dictator in "reality" and "on paper." The Supreme is extremely conscious of himself as both an actor in the world and an object of language. The chimerical image describes the novel perfectly as it is of mixed form. The Supreme is not done, however; in his capacity as a philosopher of language, he informs us that "forms disappear." The Supreme says that:

Forms disappear, words remain, to signify the impossible. No story can be told. No story worth the telling. But true language hasn't yet been born. Animals communicate with each other, without words. Better than we, who are so proud of having invented words out of the raw material of the chimerical. Without foundation. No relation to life. Do you know, Patiño, what life is, what death is? No; you don't know. Nobody knows. No one has ever known whether life is what lives or what dies. No one will ever know. What's more, it would be useless to know, once we grant that the impossible is useless. There would have to be words in our language that had a voice. Free space. A memory of their own. Words that subsisted alone, that brought place with them. A place. Their place.

⁶⁶ Augusto Roa Bastos, *I, the Supreme*, 2nd Edition (New York: Vintage, 2019). 11

Their own material. A space where the word would happen the way an event does.⁶⁷

The forms, whether taken in a linguistic or literary sense, are the “raw material” of literature. They are the basis on which we communicate. The Supreme is speaking of the fractured nature of language. Since language is fractured, the literary work of art, which is composed of language, is inevitably fractured as well. This passage from the Supreme Dictator echoes what has been written by Theodor Adorno in his work on aesthetics. One of the important concepts to be found in Adorno’s aesthetics is the enigmatic nature of the work of art. Its meaning is not straightforward. Even though Roa Bastos is writing a political novel, that does not mean that the meaning of his novel is entirely political in the manner that the typical political thriller is. Adorno writes:

The enigma of artworks is their fracturedness. If transcendence were present in them, they would be mysteries, not enigmas; they are enigmas because, through their fracturedness, they deny what they would actually like to be. Only in the recent past—in Kafka’s damaged parables—has the fracturedness of art become thematic. Retrospectively, all artworks are similar to those pitiful allegories in graveyards, the broken-off stelae. Whatever perfection they may lay claim to, artworks are lopped off.⁶⁸

Roa Bastos, who comes after Kafka, is very much Kafkaesque in the sense that he shows us the fractured nature of narrative. *I the Supreme* experiments with narrative in such a way as to produce a certain disorientation in the reader. The novel often takes the form of a historiological debate between historians. This is not to say that Roa Bastos uses his sources in the manner of a historian. He most certainly does not. He

⁶⁷ Ibid. 11.

⁶⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997). 126.

participates in a form of pastiche. The novel freely borrows from the historiography of his subject Dr. Francia, dictator of Paraguay. The intertextual material in this novel is immense. It is almost as if Roa Bastos, in keeping with the theme of fracturedness and formlessness, has created a work which blurs the distinction between reality and the text. The reader is constantly forced to reinterpret the material that they are given. As one of Roa Bastos's most important interpreters notes:

Roa's major source is the study *El Supremo Dictador* by Julio Cesar Chaves, first published in 1942 and reissued in expanded and revised versions over the following twenty years. Though Chaves provides the bulk of the information about Francia, his contribution to the thematics and style of the novel is minimal. In contrast, a number of works (both literary and historical) that are mentioned only in passing, or not at all, are centrally important to an understanding of the genesis of Roa's novel. A silenced but central theoretical text is Benveniste's famous work on structural linguistics, notably his discussions of the personal pronouns (which informs the YO/EL distinction in the novel) and of the distinctions in Romance verb forms between history and discourse. Similarly, Borges is mentioned but once, yet his concept of the interrelations between texts has bearing on the novel.⁶⁹

The relationships between texts, however, will not completely allow us to comprehend the work's "truth content," as Adorno would say. Adorno writes in his *Aesthetic Theory* that

[b]y demanding its solution, the enigma points to its truth content. It can only be achieved by philosophical reflection. This alone is the justification of aesthetics. Although no artwork can be reduced to rationalistic determinations, as is the case with what art judges, each artwork through the neediness implicit in its enigmaticalness nevertheless turns toward interpretive reason. No message is to be squeezed out of *Hamlet*; this in no way impinges on its truth content. That great artists, the Goethe who wrote fairy tales no less than Beckett, want nothing to do with interpretations only underscores the difference of the truth content

⁶⁹ Daniel Balderston, "Roa's Julio César: Commentaries and Reflections," *Chasqui* 19, no. 1 (1990): 10–18.

from the consciousness and the intention of the author and does so by the strength of the author's own self-consciousness.⁷⁰

Simply mining a novel for political content obscures what the novel as a form does. It put characters into motion, and the novelist herself does not have the ability to completely control them in the end. Political novels are sometimes relegated by aesthetes as less worthy artistically because of their content. *I the Supreme*, and the Latin Boom novel more generally, collapse the distinction between the socially committed novel and art for art's sake, because of the ambiguity that they produce. While there was a modernist movement that preceded the Boom called Modernismo, which was spearheaded by Ruben Dario, the Latin Boom novelists were the first to gain true exposure. In the following section, I would like to explore Roa Bastos in the context of modernism.

Roa Bastos and Modernism

The dictator is one who dictates. His writing or speech need not be sophisticated. Augusto Roa Bastos's novel *I the Supreme* is a "dictator novel," but it is just as concerned with the nature of writing and its relationship to authority. During the early 20th century, many fields of knowledge, including philosophy and literature, made what Richard Rorty called a "linguistic turn." The linguistic turn involved an analytic philosophy centered around Wittgenstein and in Continental circles the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. While they had fundamentally different approaches, both camps, throughout the 20th century, were concerned with how our language aligns with

⁷⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997). 128.

our reality. In the case of the early Wittgenstein, many philosophical problems arise from the misuse of language, and our job as philosophers is to clarify our language. In Saussure, attention is called to the arbitrary nature of language. In literature, however, one of the first writers in the 20th century to engage with this problem directly was Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "Ein Brief" or "A Letter" makes clear the problem of language that was being felt in other fields. A German writing in the early 20th century may seem somewhat distant from Roa Bastos, but they are wrestling with similar concerns.

The imaginary letter, written by a gentleman named Lord Chandos to Francis Bacon, elucidates some of the features that societies or individuals face when they are unable to find the appropriate language to express their reality. Everyday rhetoric is unable to confront the new challenges in political, philosophical, and artistic endeavor. Hofmannsthal's character Lord Chandos says that he is a man who has "completely lost the ability to think or speak coherently about anything at all."⁷¹ Chandos described himself as a person who once lived in a state of "continuous inebriation."⁷² He delighted in the classics and nurtured within himself the wisdom of the ancients. When his affliction began, however, Chandos describes the inability to summon words for the topics he once mastered:

Firstly, I gradually lost the ability, when discussing relatively elevated or general topics, to utter words normally used by everyone with unhesitating fluency. I felt

⁷¹ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *The Lord Chandos Letter* (New York Review Books Classics, 2012).121.

⁷² *Ibid.* 120.

an inexplicable uneasiness in even pronouncing the words “spirit”, “soul” or “body”. I found myself unable to produce an opinion on affairs of court, events in Parliament...And not out of any kind of scruples—you know my candor, which borders on thoughtlessness. Rather, the abstract words which the tongue must enlist as a matter of course in order to bring out an opinion disintegrated in my mouth like rotten mushrooms.⁷³

Chandos describes how he attempted to retreat into the classics to help resolve his illness of the mind. He takes up Seneca and Cicero but reading them only intensifies his loneliness and estrangement.⁷⁴ Chandos resolves to live his life in literary silence and never write again. Whereas the problem of language reduces the early Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein would later distance himself from this view) and Chandos to silence.

The main characters of Roa Bastos’s novel are José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia and his secretary Policarpo Patiño. Their relationship mimics that of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza but takes on a more sinister quality. Every directive that the Supreme makes appears tinged with irony. Anyone familiar with contemporary internet discourse knows that irony is currently an abused mode. Irony in our context is often used by right-wing forces to distance themselves from the abhorrent statements that they make. If I make a statement indicating that I believe that Black persons are inferior, but I cloak it in an ironic statement, I am better able to tell my listeners that “I was not being serious” or that they are being too serious. This is a form of play. Sartre, the 20th

⁷³ Ibid. 121.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 122.

century French philosopher, in his essay on anti-Semitism, remarks that the anti-Semite has “the right to play”:⁷⁵

Never believe that anti-Semites are completely unaware of the absurdity of their replies. They know that their remarks are frivolous, open to challenge. But they are amusing themselves, for it is their adversary who is obliged to use words responsibly, since he believes in words. The anti-Semites have the *right* to play. They even like to play with discourse for, by giving ridiculous reasons, they discredit the seriousness of their interlocutors. They delight in acting in bad faith, since they seek not to persuade by sound argument but to intimidate and disconcert. If you press them too closely, they will abruptly fall silent, loftily indicating by some phrase that the time for argument is past.⁷⁶

While Sartre was talking about anti-Semitism in Europe, his quote perfectly describes the discourse that the Supreme engages in. At several points in the novel, the Supreme compares himself to Christ and complains about the persecution he is suffering while he oppresses others.⁷⁷ The first thing of note that the Supreme relays to us about his personality is the fact that, through years of dictating, his sense of self has become essentially partitioned into three parts:

To attune words to the sound of thought, which is never a solitary murmur, however intimate it may be; less still if it is the speech, the thought involved in dictating. If the ordinary man never talks to himself, the Supreme Dictator continually talks to others. He projects his voice before himself so as to be heard, listened to, obeyed. Although he may appear to be close-mouthed, silent, mute, his silence is commanding. Which means that in The Supreme at least there are two persons. The I can divide to form an active third who is an adequate judge of our responsibility with regard to the act that we must decide upon. In my day, I was a good ventriloquist. At present, I am unable even to imitate my own voice.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate* (Schocken, 1995).13.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*13.

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⁷⁸ Augusto Roa Bastos, *I, the Supreme*, 2nd Edition (New York: Vintage, 2019). 18.

The reference to Christianity and its trinitarianism is quite clear. More importantly, though, I am under the impression that this passage also plays with a dominant motif in modernist literature: the fragmentation of the self. In order to further illustrate this, I will provide an example from a modernist author that expands on this theme. Fernando Pessoa, the prominent Portuguese poet, dramatizes the fragmentation of the self in a very similar manner in his *Book of Disquiet*. I am not insinuating that Pessoa had direct influence upon Roa Bastos; I am simply stating that this theme was frequently found in the literature of modernism. Pessoa writes:

I often fail to recognize myself, a frequent occurrence among those who know themselves. I observe myself in the various disguises in which I live. Of the things that change I retain only what stays the same... So completely have I become a fiction of myself that the minute any natural feeling (should I experience such a thing) is born, it becomes at once an imagined feeling—memory becomes dream, dream a forgetting of dreams, self-knowledge a lack of self-reflection.⁷⁹

This fragmentation of personality is not merely an attribute of kingship but of the modern self in general. The breakdown of tradition norms leaves the subject in a state of bifurcation. These aspects of modernism are immediately recognizable in Roa Bastos. While his political insights are often worthy of Hobbes in respect to their insights on sovereign power. I do not want the reader to forget that he is an artist and certain aesthetic motifs are to be found in his work. We would be doing the text a disservice if we simply read it the same way we read a piece of journalism or philosophy.

⁷⁹ Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, Complete Edition (New Directions, 2017). 448-449.

6 Roa Bastos and Wittgenstein: The Supreme's Philosophy of Language

6.1 Introduction

When trying to interpret Wittgenstein, a bitter dispute almost always ensues. Particularly in the work of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP), almost every statement lends itself to an alternative interpretation. While we are learning more every year about the meaning and the genesis of this work, a consensus has not been built yet. My reading will be more comparative. What in Roa Bastos's work can be elucidated by comparing it to Wittgenstein? While this will only be a section of the thesis, I hope to tease out a common thread that will be important throughout. Both writers, despite their different backgrounds, are concerned about the use of language. Roa Bastos does not have the stature of Wittgenstein outside of Latin America; I suspect this is because his major work, *I the Supreme*, is rather dense and difficult in comparison to the works of Gabriel García Márquez and other more popular figures in The Boom and Modernismo.⁸⁰ With that said, many of the themes present in *I the Supreme* were and continue to be of interest to philosophers.

Augusto Roa Bastos's novel is a "dictator novel." As I explained in the previous chapter, the novel is one of many in this tradition in Latin America and the rest of the Global South. What makes the novel peculiar—and, dare I say, special—is its direct engagement with philosophical literature. The novel makes several references to Plato

⁸⁰ Modernismo is the first instance of Literary Modernism in Latin America that preceded "The Boom" of the 1960s and 70s.

and Rousseau, both of whom are, in their own way, philosophers of language as well as of politics. The dictator in the novel is based upon the dictator of Paraguay José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia. Dr. Francia was a real dictator who ruled in Paraguay from 1814–1840. Roa Bastos uses the figure of Dr. Francia to meditate on the relationship between language and political power. While politics is not the immediate concern of the early Wittgenstein, the use of language is, and this is a dominant theme in the novel *I the Supreme*.

6.2 Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and the Language of the Supreme

“Patiño. Forget that tripe of yours about an *ear* able to understand all languages in a single one. Utter madness!”⁸¹

Wittgenstein's treatise is organized in a peculiar way. It is not structured like a traditional work of philosophy but, instead, is mostly a series of declarative statements. Wittgenstein early in the book says that “what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.”⁸² Paradoxically, not much of what Wittgenstein says is very clear to the reader in their first attempt, but generally what he means is that he wants to place limits upon philosophical inquiry. Philosophy, according to Wittgenstein, is not one of the natural sciences.⁸³ He goes on to explain:

Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity. A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations. Philosophy does not result in “philosophical propositions”, but rather

⁸¹ Augusto Roa Bastos, *I, the Supreme*, 2nd Edition (New York: Vintage, 2019). 8.

⁸² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (Routledge Classics)*, Second Edition (Routledge, 2003). 3.

⁸³ *Ibid.* 29.

in the clarification of propositions. Without philosophy thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task is to make them clear and to give them sharp boundaries. (4.112).⁸⁴

What, then, is literature in Wittgenstein's formula? Is there something special about philosophy that allows it to achieve the logical clarification of thought that literature cannot? From the early Wittgenstein's point of view, according to Alex Burri in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, literature is not something of "cognitive value." In other words, it does not contribute to knowledge. Burri writes:

Fiction indeed lacks cognitive value—at least when considered from a Tractarian point of view. This still leaves open whether the reading of fictional texts can impart certain abilities to us. But the acquisition of abilities, even if they should turn out to be cognitively valuable, is not the same thing as gaining knowledge.

I would like to argue that there is a difference between a fiction and a fictional text, in that there is no such thing as pure fiction. A fictional text, such as a novel, requires a series of relationships rooted in verifiable knowledge in order to even be comprehensible to us. Indeed, in the case of Roa Bastos's *I, the Supreme*, the dictator makes numerous declarative statements about the nature of language, often with more formal argumentation than Wittgenstein. For example, Roa Bastos writes:

Possessed of the same organs, men speak and animals do not. Do you find that reasonable? Hence it is not spoken language that differentiates man from the animal, but rather, the possibility of forging a language to suit his needs. Could you invent a language in which the sign is identical to the object? Even the most abstract and indeterminate of objects. The infinite. A perfume. A dream. The Absolute. Could you find a way for all of this to be transmitted at the speed of light? No; you can't. We can't.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Ibid. 29-30.

⁸⁵ Augusto Roa Bastos, *I, the Supreme*, 2nd Edition (New York: Vintage, 2019). 57-58.

Roa Bastos does not endorse this view of language by The Supreme. My point here is that a novel is not an aesthetic object like the kinds typically described by philosophers. It makes observations of an empirical and philosophical nature and cannot be treated as a fiction in a metaphysical or transcendental sense. While it cannot be said to produce knowledge in the manner of the natural sciences, it is cognitively valuable in the way that philosophy is because it is able to clarify concepts. Most fiction takes the form of a narrative, and there have been studies showing that the composition of narrative is an effective method for communicating ideas, even in the science classroom. As a study from Renate Prins, Lucy Avraamidou, and Martin Goedhart notes:

Research findings have provided evidence that narrative structures are useful for learning science. Researchers argued that narratives could humanize science education by taking into account the human elements of science and consequently help create a more detailed index than abstract knowledge, usually presented in science education.⁸⁶

With that said, Burri was arguing from the point of view of Wittgenstein in his early career. Perhaps, as Burri states, the “argumentation” of the *Tractatus* does not allow us to view literature as cognitively viable in the way a modern theorist would suggest. The early Wittgenstein may have thought that literature was a minor field of human endeavor. Given what we know about Wittgenstein, this does not appear to be

⁸⁶ Renate Prins, Lucy Avraamidou, and Martin Goedhart, “Tell Me a Story: The Use of Narrative as a Learning Tool for Natural Selection,” *Educational Media International* 54, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 20–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523987.2017.1324361>.

the case. It is well known that Wittgenstein was not particularly well read in the history of philosophy. Ray Monk writes:

Cambridge is the only university in the world that would have accepted Wittgenstein on these terms. Had he broken off his engineering studies in order to study philosophy at Oxford, Vienna, Berlin, Paris, Harvard or any other leading university of the time, he would have fallen at the first hurdle, most likely rejected because of his almost complete ignorance of the work of any philosophers other than Frege and Russell. And, even if he had overcome this hurdle, he would have been obliged to do what, in fact, he never did throughout his entire life, namely study the works of the great philosophers of the past. Only after he had shown some understanding of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz, Hume, etc. would he have been allowed, as a graduate student, to devote himself to his own research.⁸⁷

An area in which he was well read, however, was literature. We know that he engaged with writings of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky and that he read Soren Kierkegaard, perhaps the most literary philosopher in the canon. Bertrand Russell, in a letter he wrote shortly after Wittgenstein's completion of the *Tractatus*, writes:

I had felt in his book a flavour of mysticism, but was astonished when I found that he has become a complete mystic. He reads people like Kierkegaard and Angelus Silesius, and he seriously contemplates becoming a monk. It all started from William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and grew (not unnaturally) during the winter he spent alone in Norway before the war, when he was nearly mad. Then during the war a curious thing happened. He went on duty to the town of Tarnov in Galicia, and happened to come upon a bookshop, which, however, seemed to contain nothing but picture postcards. However, he went inside and found that it contained just one book: Tolstoy on the Gospels. He brought it merely because there was no other. He read it and re-read it, and thenceforth had it always with him, under fire and at all times. But on the whole he likes Tolstoy less than Dostoyevsky (especially Karamazov). He has penetrated deep into mystical ways of thought and feeling, but I think (though he wouldn't agree) that what he likes best in mysticism is its power to make him stop thinking. I don't much think he will really become a monk—it is an idea, not an

⁸⁷ Ray Monk, *How to Read Wittgenstein* (London: Granta Books, 2005).6

intention. His intention is to be a teacher. He gave all his money to his brothers and sisters, because he found earthly possessions a burden.⁸⁸

Wittgenstein's literary sensibilities are perhaps what compelled him to structure the *Tractatus* in such an idiosyncratic manner. In the sixth section of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein writes that "there are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical" (6.522).⁸⁹ He is describing the enigmatic nature of language and by extension art in language. This point is not dissimilar from what was said by Adorno in a previous chapter: that an essential feature of the work of art is its enigmatic nature. He is suggesting that most of the questions that we find important, if they cannot be stated clearly, are nonsensical from the point of view of philosophy. Philosophy is not the queen of sciences, as Kant would have put it. Philosophy is instead a clarification mechanism. Wittgenstein concedes that there is a mystical dimension but says that it is not within the purview of language. This is the moment when Wittgenstein and Roa Bastos come into contact. Language in art and literature is often about articulating the ineffable. The dictator in Roa Bastos's novel wants to establish a form of divine and eternal authority. The dictator says in *I the Supreme* that "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 power of words in the bad use of writing."⁹⁰ Wittgenstein writes:

⁸⁸ *Letters to Russell, Keynes, and Moore*, edited by G.H. von Wright, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1974, 82.

⁸⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (Routledge Classics)*, Second Edition (Routledge, 2003, 89

⁹⁰ Augusto Roa Bastos, *I, the Supreme*, 2nd Edition (New York: Vintage, 2019). 59 .

3.323 In everyday language it very frequently happens that the same word has different modes of signification—and so belongs to different symbols—or that two words that have different modes of signification are employed in propositions in what is superficially the same way. Thus the word ‘is’ figures as the copula, as a sign for identity, and as an expression for existence; ‘exist’ figures as an intransitive verb like ‘go’, and ‘identical’ as an adjective; we speak of *something*, but also of *something’s* happening. (In the proposition, ‘Green is green’—where the first word is the proper name of a person and the last an adjective—these words do not merely have different meanings: they are *different symbols*.)⁹¹

3.324 In this way the most fundamental confusions are easily produced (the whole of philosophy is full of them).

The early Wittgenstein would appear to suggest that the everyday language used by disciplines outside of mathematics and the natural sciences produces confusions about concepts. Wittgenstein is describing the polysemy inherent in discourse outside of symbolic logic. Wittgenstein, unlike Russell, concedes that there is a realm of meaning outside of this but that it is not accessible through language. The Supreme appears to agree with Wittgenstein that it is not the task of everyday language to coherently describe “reality” holistically “but to make the power of the word real.” By this, I mean the dictator (and the writer) acts in the world and changes it through language.

For Roa Bastos’s dictator, the Supreme, ordinary language is not merely an impediment to knowledge but a form of evil. The Supreme is frustrated by the fact that once he makes use of language, others can reinterpret his dialogue. He also, like Wittgenstein, believes that our reality is in some way confined by our language and that, while there are truths that go beyond it, it is impossible for the human being to

⁹¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Routledge Classics), Second Edition (Routledge, 2003) 18.

communicate them. Roa Bastos's dictator insinuates that the very structure of language limits us and that we would need to dispense with language in order to truly communicate:

Go on writing. It has no importance, in any event. When all is said and done, what is prodigious, fearful, unknown in the human being has never yet been put into words or books, and never will be. At least so long as the malediction of language does not disappear, in the way that irregular condemnations eventually evaporate.⁹²

This theory of language enunciated by the Supreme feeds into the problems of absolute power. If, through language, you cannot directly communicate what you mean, every dictation becomes subject to an interpretation. While the dictator can control the body, he does not have the complete ability to control language. The Supreme contemplates this fact on several occasions during the novel, the most prominent example being the following when he is talking to his secretary:

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.⁹³

While presenting what is ostensibly a political novel, *I the Supreme's* main preoccupation is with language. Or rather, it might be said that politics itself is concerned about certain types of discourse in order to manifest power and Roa Bastos is simply making them explicit. The meditations on absolute power are derived from the contemplation of linguistic theory and the philosophy of language. In fact, some of the work's concepts are derived directly from 19th- and 20th-century linguistics: concepts such as "sign" and "signifier" and the philosophical suspicion that our language does not describe the reality itself but mere appearance.

⁹² Augusto Roa Bastos, *I, the Supreme*, 2nd Edition (New York: Vintage, 2019). 392.

⁹³ *Ibid.* 57.

When Wittgenstein says that “what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence,”⁹⁴ he means statements for which we can provide no logical justification are not to be permitted. Every domain of discourse has its own rules and, while we must be careful importing something from analytic philosophy into other discourses, there is something pertinent about this warning. He says earlier in the text that “there are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.”⁹⁵ The job of the political actor is to make power manifest; this is done by exploiting the enigmatic nature of language. This is paradoxically similar to the job of the artist.

7 The Eternal Dictator

Orlando Patterson, a famous Jamaican-American scholar on history slavery, also wrote a book on the origins of Western freedom entitled *Freedom*. Patterson makes the provocative claim that monotheism is an essential precondition for sovereignty, freedom, and dictatorship in its modern form. He uses the example of Amenhotep IV or Akhnaton from ancient Egypt to illustrate the point. Akhnaton performed a radical break with the traditional religious customs of ancient Egypt by enforcing a kind of monotheism. Akhnaton is an example of what Patterson calls sovereign freedom:

What Akhnaton did, or attempted to do, was to break through the one barrier that came between him and the freedom which only a single, universal god could claim. That barrier was Egyptian polytheism and its entrenched body of priests.

⁹⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (Routledge Classics)*, Second Edition (Routledge, 2003), 89.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 89.

In the heavenly world, as on earth, a plurality of gods ensured a counterbalancing of divine powers. As imperial monarch, Akhnaton ruled supreme in this world; but he was still not totally free, for he still had the gods and their priests to contend with. So by abolishing all other gods, and replacing them with one god, the solar disk, and by then identifying himself with it, Akhnaton achieved the absolute freedom of total sovereignty, both in heaven and on earth.

By abolishing the other gods, Akhnaton signified to the Egyptian people a new form of discourse, that of absolute power. In concluding, Patterson leaves the following note about sovereign freedom: “It is important to remember that it had its first explicit, intellectual—if not ethical—expression in the power and lust of an ugly, artistic tyrant.”⁹⁶ Patterson makes an explicit connection between the aesthetic and dictatorial impulses. Yukio Mishima, in his novel *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, creates a startling character portrait of a mentally disturbed young man who commits an act of desecration. While he is certainly not the first to conjure the comparison, he insinuates that there is a certain psychological affinity between those who want to be “great” artists and those who become dictators. The main character, Mizoguchi, desires power above all else. Mizoguchi describes his lust for power in straightforward terms:

As can easily be imagined, a youth like myself came to entertain two opposing forms of power wishes. In history I enjoyed the descriptions of tyrants. I saw myself as a stuttering, taciturn tyrant... me; on the other hand, I fancied myself as a great artist, endowed with the dearest vision—a veritable sovereign of the inner world. My outer appearance was poor, but in this way my inner world became richer than anyone else’s. Was it not natural that a young boy who suffered from an indelible drawback like mine should have come to think that he was a secretly chosen being? I felt as though somewhere in this world a mission awaited me of which I myself still knew nothing.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Orlando Patterson, *Freedom: Volume I: Freedom In The Making Of Western Culture* (Basic Books, 1992). 41.

⁹⁷ Yukio Mishima, *Temple of the Golden* (Vintage Digital, 2010), <https://www.kobo.com/gr/en/ebook/the-temple-of-the-golden-pavilion-1>.

Mizoguchi does not become an artist or a dictator; he instead becomes a terrorist who burns down the sacred religious site, the Temple of the Golden Pavilion from which the novel gets its name.⁹⁸ Mishima, in this novel, displays the psychology of someone who wants to exercise power in two of its most potent forms. Our Supreme dictator in *I the Supreme* displays some of the same tendencies. For example, one of the many voices that intrudes on the Supreme's narrative makes critical comments about the dictator's writing ability and compares him unfavorably to Cervantes.

See, Brother Bel-Asshole, if you don't find this a most amusing story! As Your Mercy no doubt already knows, our Great Man disappears now and again for periodic confinements. He cloisters himself for months at a time in his quarters in the Hospital Barracks, making sure that the word of his retreat gets round through the use of the method of the official rumor, in other words the open State secret, so as to devote himself to the study of the projects and plans that his feverish imagination claims to have conceived in order to place Paraguay at the head of the American states. The rumor 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.⁹⁹

This passage, which I have quoted previously in an abbreviated form, is an obvious reference to Borges's "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*." Besides that, it shows that the dictator is under the spell of his own fictions. The point I believe that Roa Bastos is making is that the Supreme Dictator—or, indeed, any dictator—is a Quixote-like figure; while they do not necessarily read chivalric romances, they must believe in

⁹⁸ It should be remembered the author of this work died while committing a terrorist act also.

⁹⁹ Augusto Roa Bastos, *I, the Supreme*, 2nd Edition (New York: Vintage, 2019). 66-67

the myth of their own power, which is propagated by modes of discourse. The comparison can take on quite a literal dimension as well. Kim Jong-il, for instance, wrote a treatise on theater, Stalin dictated the direction of art in the Soviet Union, and Hitler's forays into painting are well known. The aesthetic, the ethical, and the political may be conjoined in ways that are uncomfortable for us to fathom. The words great writers may have set aside for aesthetic purposes are readily used by leaders to further political agendas. This politicization of literary aesthetics is something the Supreme does:

The atrabilious Dictator has a stock of notebooks filled with clauses and conceits that he has lifted from good books. When he has an urgent need to draft a text, he goes through them. He selects the mottoes and maxims that to his mind are most effective, and proceeds to scatter them about here and there, regardless of whether or not they are à propos. All his efforts are concentrated on good style. Of good panegyrics he memorizes the rhetorical closes that most impress him. He takes dictionary in hand to vary the words. He never works on anything without it. The History of the Romans and the Letters of Louis XIV are the diurnal from which he prays each day.¹⁰⁰

At the same time, the Supreme lashed out against writers throughout the text.

The Supreme writes: "In every country that considers itself civilized, there ought to be laws such as the ones I have established in Paraguay against penpushers [sic] of every breed. Corrupted corrupters. Vagrants. Scroungers. Ruffians, cheats and crooks of the written word. The worst poison that peoples suffer from would thereby be eradicated."¹⁰¹ It becomes clear that dictatorship, according to the Supreme, is a perverse and lethal game. If he can eradicate other voices in the society, discourse must ultimately flow

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 66

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 66-67.

through him and he can then truly “dictate.” It is difficult to shout over a chorus, so there must be silence. The Supreme later writes in his notebook that “nothing enhances authority so much as silence.”¹⁰²

The passages remarking on the eternal nature of the Supreme are among the most obscure in the text. These passages, however, reveal that Roa Bastos is essentially evoking the concept of the “king’s two bodies” even though he does not call it by that name. The Supreme constantly brings to our attention an “I/He” distinction as if the “I” were his true personality and the “He” consisted of those actions that he commits in his capacity as ruler. He constantly compares himself to the personage of Christ. He is obsessed with the concept of the trinity.

No one is taking my life from me. I am giving it. In doing so I am not even imitating Christ. According to the melancholy dean, the Son-God committed suicide on Golgotha. It matters little that the cause was the salvation of men. Perhaps the self-entitled “People of God” did not deserve, does not deserve, will not ever deserve to have any god commit suicide for its sake...A God-God-God three times First-Last is not one even though he may rise from the dead on the Third Day. Even though he is a Trinitarian-God in Three-Separate-and-Equal-Persons. If he really is one, he is obliged to exist without a pause; to be unable to die even for an instant.¹⁰³

The Christological conception of kingship is well known to us in the form of Ernst Kantorowicz’s work *The King’s Two Bodies*. The dualistic and trinitarian utterances of the Supreme invite that comparison. Kantorowicz is a careful scholar. It can become frustrating at times because he does not draw implications for contemporary politics

¹⁰² Ibid. 167.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 414

where he probably should. With that said, even Kantorowicz himself does see the connection between the Christological concept of the “king’s two bodies” and development in the past.¹⁰⁴ When speaking of the Norman Anonymous, which is the name given to the unknown author of a collection of treatises written around the year 1100 in defense of royal authority, Kantorowicz introduces to the concept of *persona mixta*. As I stated before, Kantorowicz is often careful not to draw comparisons with the contemporary era; there is a point in the text where he acknowledges that persons of mixed capacities exist in nearly every political organization. Among the many topics he saw fit to discuss, there was also what later would be defined as *persona mixta*, the “mixed person” in which various capacities or strata concurred. “Mixtures” of all kinds of capacities, of course, may be found today as in every other age and under almost any conditions. What matters here is only the *persona mixta* in the religio-political sphere, where it was represented chiefly by bishop and king, and where the “mixture” referred to the blending of spiritual and secular powers and capacities united in one person. Dual capacity in this sense was a feature customary and rather common among the clergy during the feudal age when bishops were not only princes of the Church but also feudatories of kings.¹⁰⁵

If mixed persons can make themselves manifest under “almost any conditions,” it is not a surprise that we see it in Roa Bastos’s novel and in modern dictatorship. I will

¹⁰⁴ Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton University Press, 2016). 450

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 43.

now direct my attention toward the ideas of “the self” and “the state.” The reader may find it peculiar that I end the essay with nebulous conceptions such as “the self” and “the state.” One is considered to be the most personal expression of our being and the other a completely public demonstration of collective political organization. This is, however, an ahistorical conception. These notions seem to have arrived in Western culture simultaneously. Timothy Reiss, in his book *Mirages of the Selfe*, argues that “the private, as an arena of the individual closed from the public and communal, seems to have been literally unthinkable until the first or second century A.D. at the earliest; even then thought of as aberrant well into the European seventeenth century.”¹⁰⁶ The concept of a self, cut off from the public sphere, arises from the growth of the modern state. Thomas Hobbes, the chief Absolutist philosopher in the English tradition, was aware of this, at least implicitly. Hobbes’ methodology in *Leviathan* is extremely idiosyncratic. Hobbes believes that before one can govern, one must learn how to read:

He that is to govern a whole nation must read in himself, not this or that particular man, but mankind, which thought it be hard to do, harder than to learn any language or science, yet when I shall have set down my own reading orderly and perspicuously, the pains left another will be only to consider if he also find not the same in himself. For this kind of doctrine admitteth no other demonstration.¹⁰⁷

In this passage, Hobbes is almost articulating a form of political phenomenology. In order to be acquainted with other beings and the external world, I must have read my

¹⁰⁶ Timothy J Reiss, *Mirages of the Selfe: Patterns of Personhood in Ancient and Early Modern Europe* (Stanford University Press, 2003). 3-4

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1688* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1994). 5.

own self to perfection. The proclamations of the Supreme in Roa Bastos's work take on a heightened significance in this context. The Supreme when dictating to his scribe says: "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."¹⁰⁸ Part of the job of power is to "read." It is telling that Hobbes distinguishes it from science. The implication of this is that Hobbesian reading is a kind of art, the most supreme form of reflection that can be initiated by the human mind. Hobbes in Chapter XVI also defines for us what he believes a person to be. A person, according to Hobbes, is "he whose words and actions are considered either as his own, or as representing the words or actions of another man, or of any other thing they are attributed to whether truly or by fiction."¹⁰⁹ According to Hobbes, there are both natural and artificial persons. This becomes important later as the sovereign is an artificial person. Hobbes, when discussing the artificial person, distinguished between what he calls "actors" and "authors." Hobbes writes:

Of persons artificial, some have their words and actions owned by those whom they represent. And then the person is the actor, and he that owneth his words and actions is the author, in which case the actor acteth by authority... From hence it followeth that when the actor maketh a covenant by authority, he bindeth thereby the author, no less than if he had made it himself, and no less subjecteth him to all the consequence of the same.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Augusto Roa Bastos, *I, the Supreme*, 2nd Edition (New York: Vintage, 2019). 20-21.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1688* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 1994). 101.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 101-102

“Of persons artificial, *some* have their words and actions owned by those whom they represent.” The word “some” is doing a lot of work here. What happens when a representative power is completely detached from those whom he represents? This seems to be the fundamental question facing contemporary democracy. What happens when the actor and the author are unified as a mixed persona? Roa Bastos’s fiction intrudes upon reality in much the same manner as Hobbes’ artificial sovereign does. It also seems that Hobbes does not completely escape the idea of a mixed person in his formation of the sovereign. The authoritarian leaders of the contemporary era, among them Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, Xi Jinping, and Vladimir Putin, are highly skilled at authoring reality, and that reality is often more exciting than the one put forward by those with a moral conscience. Our new articulations of the *persona mixta* are both actors and authors. This is beyond the Hobbesian sovereign. Hobbes, no matter how authoritarian he could be, envisioned a type of contractual agreement between the sovereign and those he governs.

While the minutia of the legal arguments in every society are different, it appears that something like the “king’s two bodies” exists in many societies where an absolute ruler takes power. This comes with the caveat that it seems to be easier to do this in societies where Christianity has taken hold. Scott Pearce has done work examining the “king’s two bodies” in the context of Ancient China and has found that while emperors did sometimes present themselves as gods, they were not always effective in depicting

that image.¹¹¹ A description of Rafael Trujillo's death provided by Lauren Derby illustrates my point:

On the last day of May, 1961, the dictator who ruled the Caribbean-island nation of the Dominican Republic with an iron fist for more than three decades (1930–1961), Rafael Trujillo, was shot dead on his way home in an ambushed assault on his car. The culmination of months of international plotting involving the Kennedy Administration, the CIA, disgruntled Dominican elites, and a handful of regime-insider defectors, Trujillo's long rule came to an end in that one fleeting instant. Yet while the assassins succeeded in killing their opponent, the second stage of the military takeover failed. The coup plotters were unable to complete part two of the plan, that of installing themselves in office, because none of the other collaborators could believe that the dictator had died without actually seeing his corpse, since declaring themselves his successors with Trujillo alive would mean certain demise to the conspirators. The dangers of transporting Trujillo's remains, stuffed as they were unceremoniously into a Chevrolet trunk, around a city swarming with secret police, eventually aborted the coup. The problem of belief in Trujillo's death, I propose, was related to a larger phenomenon. There was a mystical awe surrounding the dictator, as if Trujillo's authority transcended corporal limits, endowing him with a suprahuman status.¹¹²

The conspirators against Trujillo effectively believed in the eternal body of the king. Even though they despised the despot, they could not accept the fact that he had truly died without verification. There is a difference, however, between the way that a medieval king represents God and the way in which the discourse surrounding Trujillo effectively elevates him to the level of a deity. With the proliferation of mass media technologies, Trujillo and his contemporaries were able to endow themselves with the

¹¹¹ Scott Pearce, "A King's Two Bodies: The Northern Wei Emperor Wencheng and Representations of the Power of His Monarchy," *Frontiers of History in China* 2012, no. 1 (2012): 90–105, <https://doi.org/10.3868/s020-001-012-0006-6>.

¹¹² Lauren Derby, "The Dictator's Two Bodies: Hidden Powers of State in the Dominican Imagination," *Etnofoor* 12, no. 2 (1999): 92–116.

specter of the divine. The medieval king, while aspiring to absolute authority, could not have hoped to inspire the fear and religious awe that the 20th-century dictator inspired.

At the end of novel, Roa Bastos displays the impact the persona of The Supreme Dictator has on the populace. For example, he includes what is taught to school children about Dr. Francia. A twelve year has this to say about the dictator “The Supreme Dictator is a thousand years old like God and has shoes with gold buckles edged and trimmed with leather. The Supreme decides when we should be born and that those who dies should go to heaven...”¹¹³ Most of the testimonies given by the children about The Supreme do reflect the personality cult he has been able to create within the authoritarian society. With that begin said, not all of testimonies given by the children are laudatory of The Supreme. One statement given by a little girl named Petronita Carísimo stands out:

Mama says that he’s the Bad Man who put our grandfather in prison just because the horse he rides every afternoon stumbled on a loose flagstone in front of Grandfather’s house. He ordered a heavy shackle put on him and he sank to the bottom of the earth, so we’ll never see Grandpa José again.” Shall I tear up this little girl’s composition, Sire? No. Leave it. The truth as children see it is not to be torn up, twisted, bent, folded or mutilated.¹¹⁴ The Supreme, in this case, allows the testimony against him to be written. Even though the truth the little girl articulates is oppositional, it is only

¹¹³ Augusto Roa Bastos, *I, the Supreme*, 2nd Edition (New York: Vintage, 2019). 403.

¹¹⁴ Augusto Roa Bastos, *I, the Supreme*, 2nd Edition (New York: Vintage, 2019). 404.

allowed with the consent of The Supreme. Most of the other school children, however, do believe in his power. The quotation displays that even the parameters of dissent are determined by The Supreme. Even those who resist end up participating in his paradigm.

8 Conclusion: A Personal Note on “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”

What exactly is at stake in the arguments I’ve presented? I have not, to this point, explained the title of the thesis. It is obviously a reference to Donald Trump’s mantra, “drain the swamp,” which in Trumpian terminology means to “fix” the problems of the federal government through executive privilege and dictatorial fiat. “Rising from the swamp,” used as the title of the thesis, is instead a quotation from Pablo Neruda’s *Canto General*, Book Five, “The Sand Betrayed,” in a section called “The Executioners,” sometimes translated as “The Hangmen.” Many of the “executioners” that Neruda refers to are strongmen from Latin America like Dr. Francia, who is the subject of *I the Supreme*. The poem reads:

Saurian, scaly America coiled
 round thriving greenery, round the mast
 rising from the swamp
 you suckled terrible offspring
 with the poisonous milk of vipers¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Pablo Neruda, *Canto General: Song of the Americas*, trans. Mariela Griffor (North Adams, Massachusetts: Tupelo Press, 2016). 184-185

At the end of *I the Supreme*, the compiler of the novel says that the dictatorial function is to replace writers, thinkers, artists, and historians.¹¹⁶ The dictator, from this passage, is the child of a lizard that emerges from the swamp and emits poisonous venom. I could not think of a more fitting description of dictatorship. The goal of the dictator is to replace discourse with venom. We contemporary people, children of the here and now, may feel immune to the charms of dictatorship and irrational authority. It appears, though, that the statistical trends are not in our favor. *The Washington Post* reports that, currently, most of the world's population lives under some type of authoritarianism:

At present, the authoritarianism business is booming. According to the Human Rights Foundation's research, the citizens of 94 countries suffer under non-democratic regimes, meaning that 3.97 billion people are currently controlled by tyrants, absolute monarchs, military juntas or competitive authoritarians. That's 53 percent of the world's population. Statistically, then, authoritarianism is one of the largest—if not *the* largest—challenges facing humanity.¹¹⁷

Increasingly, many of the statistics and indexes used to measure modernization and democratization are looking unfavorable. The Age of Enlightenment thought that it would usher in a world that was secular and democratic. Figures such as Spinoza, a Dutch philosopher of the Enlightenment and a forerunner in the field of Biblical criticism, would be surprised to learn that monotheism and religious belief are on the rise globally, in part due to the missionary work done by evangelical Christians in the majoritarian

¹¹⁶ Augusto Roa Bastos, *I, the Supreme*, 2nd Edition (New York: Vintage, 2019). 435

¹¹⁷ Garry Kasparov and Thor Halvorssen, "Opinion | Why the Rise of Authoritarianism Is a Global Catastrophe," *Washington Post*, February 13, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/02/13/why-the-rise-of-authoritarianism-is-a-global-catastrophe>.

world.¹¹⁸ These trends will lead to more sectarianism and violence due to the virulence and dogmatism of that strain of Christianity. Is it a surprise that two of the largest nations in the Americas, Brazil and the United States, have exceptionally large evangelical contingencies?¹¹⁹ Currently, in the countries deemed “democratic,” such as the United States, there is a clear slide towards authoritarianism.

While I have a long-held aversion to personalizing academic writing, I have spent significant time in evangelical circles. When I was a high school student, I went to Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Georgia, which is a prominent church in the evangelical movement due to its film productions, and I attended its school, Sherwood Christian Academy. Most of the leadership in the church was white and male. Most of the opinions espoused were right-wing and celebratory of authority. In school, all things were framed from a Biblical perspective: international relations, science, and history are filtered through a Biblical lens. The teachings undermine the separation of church and state, and they teach a view of the Middle East that gives the impression that it is a playground for American imperialism in the pursuit of fulfilling Biblical prophecy. Many of the people, while exceptionally good interpersonally, have detached themselves from empirical reality. They have authored a fictional world and are attempting to impose their fictions on the rest of us. In Timothy Keese’s *American Government for Christian*

¹¹⁸ Harriet Sherwood, “Religion: Why Faith Is Becoming More and More Popular,” *The Guardian* (The Guardian, August 27, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/aug/27/religion-why-is-faith-growing-and-what-happens-next>.

¹¹⁹ Chayenne Polimédo, “The Rise of the Brazilian Evangelicals,” *The Atlantic* (January 24, 2018), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/the-evangelical-takeover-of-brazilian-politics/551423/>.

Schools, the United States constitution, which is essentially a secular document, is presented as a divinely inspired work of God. Keesee writes:

The fundamental principles of the government are woven into the fabric of the universe. In the beginning, when there was nothing but God, there was a hierarchy of authority. God is a single being, but He exists in three distinct persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit ... the Father, as His title suggests he is the leader and the policy maker.¹²⁰

God the Father as “policymaker” establishes both the authoritarian and the patriarchal tenets of the church. The essential argument is that women should not be allowed to lead, due to the fact that God is male, and further that the non-believer should not lead due to her heretical status. The goal of the *American Government* textbook is to create a metaphysical, theological, and political system total in the scope of its power to shape and determine reality. There is no room for debate outside of the Christian evangelical framework. The epilogue for students found in Keesee’s textbook reinforces what is clear throughout the text:

Over the past few decades, Christians have withdrawn from government involvement because of disillusionment...the shameful result of this abandonment is not simply the expulsion of prayer and Bible-reading from public schools, the legalization of abortion, or the decline of the society’s morality. The shame of leaving government to non-Christians is that the glories of our God are not proclaimed in an institution He created for His glory. By withdrawing from government, Christians have unwittingly reinforced the humanistic idea that government should be godless.¹²¹

¹²⁰ Timothy Keesee, *American Government for Christian Schools*, Second Edition (Greenville, S.C.: BJU Press, 2005).⁴

¹²¹ Ibid. 422

While the text attempts to say that it does not want to create a theocracy,¹²² it is deeply polemical in that it attempts to inspire the young Christian to seize control of local, state, and federal governments. It creates an alternative history of the United States, which is largely inaccurate, to serve as a pedagogical mechanism for Christians and their self-advocacy. I once had difficulty understanding Jorge Luis Borges's story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" in my early college days when I discovered Borges. It seems, however, that the total system that he describes in his story is comparable to the one I experienced as a high schooler. In Borges's parable, a group of metaphysicians create a perfect fictional world where idealism reigns. The world they create is of such perfect order that humankind attempts to replicate it in real life. Borges, however, makes the message of his story quite clear in the epilogue:

Ten years ago, any symmetry, any system with an appearance of order—dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism—could spellbind and hypnotize mankind. How could the world not fall under the sway of Tlön, how could it not yield to the vast and minutely detailed evidence of an ordered planet? It would be futile to reply that reality is also orderly. Perhaps it is, but orderly in accordance with divine laws (read: "inhuman laws") that we can never quite manage to penetrate. Tlön may well be a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth forged by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men. Contact with Tlön, the habit of Tlön, has disintegrated this world. Spellbound by Tlön's rigor, humanity has forgotten, and continues to forget, that it is the rigor of chess masters, not of angels. Already Tlön's (conjectural) "primitive language" has filtered into our schools; already the teaching of Tlön's harmonious history (filled with moving episodes) has obliterated the history that governed my own childhood; already a fictitious past has supplanted in men's memories that other past, of which we now know nothing certain—not even that it is false.¹²³

¹²² Ibid. 9

¹²³ Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions* (London: Penguin, 2000). 81

In this story, humanity finds the perfect ideological system that allows it to interpret the whole of reality. Instead of coming to terms with the chaotic nature of reality, Evangelicals impose a system of order not unlike the totalitarianism of the 20th century and do so while deploying textual and discursive strategies that align with the techniques discussed in this thesis that are evident in the dictatorship novel. While I do not mean the evangelicals are like Nazis or Stalinists in a direct way, their lack of toleration for ambiguity and their lack of acceptance for other beliefs systems concerns me. What evangelicals are doing in the political sphere is merely replicating the authoritarian structure of their church. What makes Donald Trump dangerous is not merely him as the leader of the celebrity personality cult but the culture of authoritarianism in certain sectors of the United States to which he gives expression.

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