

## The Psychosis of Power: A Lacanian Reading of Augusto Roa Bastos's *I, the Supreme*

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**Abstract:** In the mid-seventies, Paraguay was two decades into what would ultimately be the second longest dictatorship in its history, second only to the reign of its “founding father,” Doctor José Rodríguez Gaspar de Francia. The regime of Alfredo Stroessner justified its existence and articulated its continued role in Paraguayan politics on a genealogy of national identity that had its supposed roots in the Francia government, Francia’s political ideology and, in fact, in the historical person of Francia himself. In this essay I show how the great Paraguayan writer Augusto Roa Bastos’s 1974 novel, *I, the Supreme*, takes aim at the “kernel of the real” in the Stroessner regime’s political genealogy, using fiction to make evident its anamorphic manipulation of national and nationalist identity. By taking at its word the regime’s historical discourse, *I, the Supreme* reveals the psychotic logic animating its version of political power.

**Keywords:** Augusto Roa Bastos, Paraguayan politics, power and psychosis, Lacan, Žižek, psychoanalysis, authoritarianism

**CLC:** 1781    **Document Code:** A    **Article ID:** 2096-4374(2021)02-0004-08

**Doi:** 10.53397/hunnu.jflc.202102001

In the mid-seventies, Paraguay was two decades into what would ultimately be the second longest dictatorship in its history, second only to the reign of its “founding father,” Doctor José Rodríguez Gaspar de Francia. The regime of Alfredo Stroessner justified its existence and articulated its continued role in Paraguayan politics on a genealogy of national identity that had its supposed roots in the Francia government, Francia’s political ideology and, in fact, in the historical person of Francia himself.

Even when the political rhetoric of 1970s Paraguay did not explicitly use the name of Doctor Francia, his presence was implicit. As Paul Lewis shows in his study of Stroessner’s dictatorship, Paraguayan politics has historically polarized into two camps: Stroessner’s own Colorado party and the Liberal party, each tracing a political genealogy to different historical moments and figure (147). The Colorado party, supporting a strong, centralized government with broad powers of intervention in economic affairs, has traditionally looked toward the earliest dictatorships of Paraguay, including those of Francia and his two successors Carlos Antonio and Francisco Solano López, as the progenitors of its movement.

When candidates or partisans of the Colorado party attack their opposition, the Liberals, they do so by indicting them with betrayal of their country, with not being truly Paraguayan. They do this by “baptizing” their party with an original mandate, one that is bequeathed untouched by the original founder of the

nation. This mandate can have any ideological orientation they choose because in effect they are creating meaning retroactively; in other words, having posited Francia as a Colorado, something that did not exist in his time, their ideological project can then refer to a historical vantage point for legitimacy.

Such tactics are powerful because they target the individual's sense of belonging to a community, in turn an essential locus of personal identity. This historical discourse is an example of an ideological edifice, which, in Slavoj Žižek's formulation, revolves around an instance of pure signification, some tautological reference guarding an indelible, unsymbolizable kernel of the real. This kernel fuses a people's desire with the dead, symbolic structure of a discourse by creating a mirage of plenitude where there is nothing but lack. This is the function of the historical reconstruction of Doctor Francia undertaken by the Colorado party, which exploits his dead, absent, and discursive remains to organize the public desire needed to sustain its ideological program. In what follows I will show the great Paraguayan writer Augusto Roa Bastos's 1974 novel, *I, the Supreme* (*Yo, el Supremo*), takes aim at this "kernel of the real" in the Stroessner regime's political genealogy, using fiction to make evident its anamorphic manipulation of national and nationalist identity. By taking at its word the regime's historical discourse, *I, the Supreme* reveals the psychotic logic animating its version of political power.

### 1. The Death's Head in the Mirror

Perhaps the most important structural element of Roa Bastos's great novel *I, the Supreme*, is that from its very first words, the Supreme, the character who is narrating his own story, is dead. The signs come slowly at first: there is a dispatch from a town outside the capital describing the funeral rites and asking about the status of the government; there are increasing references to the fact that the Supreme never sleeps or eats; and occasionally there are clues as to the Supreme's appearance:

The death's head watches me intently. It mimics my movements as I fight for breath. I dig my nails into my Adam's apple, clutch my trachea pumping emptiness. The mummy face specter does the same. . . . It grabs the inkwell. Worse still if I manage to get there first. The skeletal old man would be pinned to the spot, multiplied, dancing in all the fragments of the mirror, of the circle of glass clouded with sweat. (89)

In an eerie parody of the mirror stage, wherein the infant on the cusp of language formulates her nascent sense of self on an alienated misrecognition, the Supreme must recognize the death's head in the glass as his own, and yet cannot. He is an unnatural, discursive monster, kept alive by the presence in his body of the Thing, the imaginary embodiment of *jouissance*.

According to Lacan, we all die two deaths, a death in the real and a death in the symbolic. If these two deaths do not coincide, if one dies in the symbolic before the real, or in the real but not in the symbolic, one inhabits what Lacan called the space between the two deaths. This space, Žižek writes, may also be opened by the process of historicization, which "implies an empty space, a non-historical kernel around which the symbolic network is articulated, [...] as soon as 'brute,' presymbolic reality is symbolized/historicized, it 'secretes,' it isolates the empty, 'indigestible' place of the Thing" (*Sublime* 135). An obvious criticism of historicization could be that the process of converting real life events and people into language somehow robs them of their proximity to truth, by evacuating their life-substance and submitting them to the limits of perspective. The Lacanian concept is precisely the opposite: rather than deprive real people and events of their life-substance, historicization, through retroactive narrativization, impregnates representations that should be dead with living substance,

namely *jouissance*, the embodied fulfillment of some Other's desire. In other words, the representation in question is organized so that in the absence at its core, which by definition "exists" at the center of any symbolic construction, the subject imagines the object of his desire.

The process by which a subject may apprehend the object of desire requires the mediation of fantasy. From Lacan's definition of ideology, a totalizing discourse that attempts to efface the impossibility at its own center, its structural support depends on a mirage in which one may apprehend the symbolic order as complete. It is thus that we can conceive of the process of historicization as one that opens a space for *jouissance*; the very imposition of retroactive narrative implies the fantasy apprehension of the historical gaze, that impossible knowledge, unlimited by perspective, through which the subject sees that very narrative as an immediate Truth.

*I, the Supreme* reacts to the process of historicization at work in the political discourses of Paraguay's dominant parties. The first important historical coordinate is the deliberate placement of the novel at a specific chronological landmark: October 21, 1840 (Roa Bastos 13). This is the date of a dispatch the Supreme receives at the very beginning of the novel, and it is also the day after José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia died. This date frames the novel with the macabre, for if it begins with the notice from the Supreme's own funeral, it ends with some detailed notes on the controversy surrounding the disappearance of his remains.

On January 31, 1961, an official circular invited historians of the nation to a conclave, in order to "initiate steps leading to the recovery of the remains of the Supreme Dictator and the restoration of the sacred relics to the national patrimony." The invitation was also extended to the citizenry as a whole, urging it to collaborate in the patriotic Crusade to reconquer both the sepulcher of the Founder of the Republic and his remains, which had disappeared, scattered to the winds by anonymous profaners, enemies of the Perpetual Dictator. (425)

This statement introduces a smattering of documents on the subject, all arguing for different burial sites, and many disputing the identity of one or the other of two skulls said to be that of the dictator. What is most fascinating, and yet somehow quite familiar, is the frenetic quest for some official mark of authenticity in the remains laying claim to the Supreme. What is it that evokes this reverence for the body, this cult of the cadaver? Is it that by possessing the body of a great historical figure we can lay a sounder claim to that person's deeds?

That may be partly the case, but it certainly does not account for the whole of it. As Žižek puts it, all authority must be, to some extent, symbolic, in that it will always depend on the power of some "pure" signifier. The obedience to leadership, especially of a highly authoritarian kind, will often turn on a "fetishistic inversion" by which the leader's dependence on the people—i.e., he is a king because the people call him a king—is inverted in the minds of his subjects, who imagine that their obedience is demanded by some special quality innate to his person. Under these circumstances, the leader's body takes on a special aura, a precious value, because it has become, in the minds of a people, an "envelopment of the sublime Thing" (Žižek, *For They Know* 160). What is most interesting about the appendix to *I, the Supreme* is how it depicts an attempt to create such a cult of the cadaver. The frantic activity is dictated from the Stroessner administration in an attempt to construct the kind of mythic halo that surrounded the mausoleums of such totalitarian leaders as Lenin and Stalin after their deaths.

This fetishistic inversion has its structural correlate in Lacan's linguistic theory, in which the process of production of meaning depends on the differentiation of master signifiers that serve to quilt meaning for an entire synchronic structure of secondary signifiers, and that are in turn definable only in reference

to that totality. We see that function repeated in the discourse of the totalitarian leader, who will attempt to quilt the entire linguistic edifice of national identity to his own person such that those who dissent are no longer represented within the corporate union of the “people.” Thus, the totalitarian leader may claim to be the true representative of the people precisely insofar as the “people” are defined as those whom he represents. This rhetorical inversion is actively at work in the writings and speeches of Colorado party politicians and is also displayed (or parodied) in the novel in the words of the Supreme: “The Republic is the totality, the union, the confederation of all the thousands of citizens who constitute it. All patriots, that is to say. Those who are not patriots must not be counted or considered part of it, save as the bad money that risks being taken for the good, as you have been taught by the Patrial Catechism” (Roa Bastos 368). Compare this example to the following words of the Colorado party’s most influential theorist, Natalicio González, where he qualifies all supporters of the Liberal party as opposed to the essence of Paraguayan culture:

It can be said that in this matter, the policies and deeds of Paraguayan liberalism constitute an anti-cultural system, if we are to maintain the proper meaning of the word. That party, during the period of its hegemony in the government of the republic, did not try to create autochthonous values, never made an effort so that the phenomena of national life would express clearly the spirit of the people. (88)

The active element of this sort of rhetoric is the evocation of a particular essence that “we” as a people share and that we deny to outsiders. What we fail to realize is that the essence we gather around is illusory, conjured by a signifying construction, such as “family values,” or “spirit of the people.” Because of these constructions’ ineffable, tautological nature, they produce a surplus of *jouissance* that binds the recipient to the ideological discourse. The key elements to this discourse are part of a largely unconscious discursive structure that has at least one of its central supports in the historicization of Dr. Francia. Roa Bastos takes this discourse at its word, not seeking to historicize a “real” historical figure, but rather to subjectify an already historicized figure.

By doing this, the author does not present us with a vision of the character that is somehow more “true to life”; rather, it works to undermine such a pretense completely. Roa Bastos does not make the real Dr. Francia speak, but instead centers attention on the fascinating Thing that animates his discursive remains. The monstrous being churning beneath the verbiage of Roa Bastos’s novel is that which historicization creates and ideology must mask.

## 2. Here be Monsters

Roa Bastos’s strategy is to take the dominant political discourse at its word, representing it as a system in which the distance of representation, both linguistic and political, has been “foreclosed.” As Lacan states, describing the effects of foreclosure and its resultant psychoses, “all that is refused in the symbolic, returns in the real” (*Le Séminaire* 21). What does it mean for a representation to return in the real? The representation no longer represents; when it returns to the subject, it returns as if from the “outside” (Nasio 235) as an integral part of the reality the subject perceives. In other words, it appears as what are commonly known to be symptoms of psychosis: delusions and hallucinations. Aside from the propensity to hallucinate, to which I will return in some detail, Lacan defines other, more specific traits of psychosis. For one, the psychotic has an overwhelming distrust of the duplicitous language of others, with its tendency toward ambiguous meanings; for a psychotic, language is a direct expression

of the world, without any possibility of confusion or “slippage” (*Le Séminaire* 17).

While the Supreme’s attitude toward language is the focus of much of the narrative, one moment is of particular interest as a *mise-en-âbime*. The dictator invents a magic pen that is discussed at great length by the “compiler” of the novel. This compiler is the textual voice that appears at various moments throughout the text in the role of mediator between the often raving, first-person account by the Supreme, and the many historical notes and documents that are offered up to either support or nuance the Supreme’s claims. In this instance, however, the compiler loses whatever semblance of “objectivity” he has had until this moment. The focus of the narrative moves away from the Supreme on to the life of this unknown character, who proceeds to tell, in a manner as delirious as that of the Supreme in his worst moments, of his obsessive quest for the Supreme’s magical, mother-of-pearl pen, the “pen with the memory-lens imbedded in the pommel” (Roa Bastos 197). The compiler interrupts here, as has become routine, to explain the meaning of this reference: “Mounted in the hollow of the cylindrical tube, scarcely larger than a very bright point, is the memory-lens that turns it into a most unusual instrument with two different yet coordinated functions: writing while at the same time visualizing the forms of another language composed exclusively of images, of *optical metaphors*, so to speak” (197).

After explaining the function of this extraordinary device, the compiler does not stop and return to the Supreme’s monologue, as one has come to expect, but rather continues in an increasingly bizarre and disjointed style to tell of how the memory-pen eventually came into his possession after he had coveted it for the greater part of his life. Unfortunately, he goes on to say, the pen for which he fought so hard “is partially broken, so that today it only writes with very thick strokes that tear the paper, effacing words as it writes them, endlessly projecting the same mute images stripped of their sonorous space” (198). But this was not the case for the Supreme, when he used the pen to write his memories, and his histories:

I write and the tissue of words is already crossed by the chain of the visible [...] Writing within language makes every object, present, absent, or future, impossible. These notes, these spasmodic notations, this discourse which refuses to discuss, this visible speaking artificially fixed in the pen; more precisely, this crystal of aqua micans imbedded in my memory-penholder offers the roundness of a scene visible from all points of the sphere. Machine encrusted in a scriptural instrument allowing things outside of language to be seen. By me. Only by me. Since the visible speaking will be destroyed by what is written. (202)

Not only does the Supreme’s magical toy supersede the inherent limits of language by bypassing its representational function, within this foreclosed reality it allows him to mesh with his fantasy object, thereby dissolving the limits of individual perspective and bringing him into a total immediacy with his world. The parallel is clearly made here between that fantasy and the object of historical representation, for the historical “gaze” is one materialization of the unattainable object of desire, and the compiler’s pathetic inability to perceive the images of the Supreme’s foreclosed imagination is one of the centrepins of the novel.

Another, still more striking psychotic element that characterizes the Supreme’s behavior is, of course, his near constant delusionary state, which at many times erupts into outright hallucination. There are too many instances of such delusion to comment on all of them, and indeed, some are practically beyond any attempt at comprehension, lapsing instead into a whirlpool of colors, sounds, smells, and distorted images. Some of the more impressive verbal hallucinations involve the Supreme’s dog, Sultan, and his predecessor’s dog, Hero, each appropriately suited to his master’s ideological outlook, the one a *sans-culotte*, the other patrician to the bone. The two often quarrel, in a manner clearly evocative

of Cervantes's *Colloquy of Dogs* (Cervantes, the compiler tells us, is one of the Supreme's preferred authors) and, at times, a critical, superegoic voice is present in either or both of their voices. Hero denigrates the Supreme's relation to his people, saying, "Your excellency loves his offspring the way the mother-pelican does; she caresses them so fervently she kills them. Let us hope that your blood of a father-pelican will bring them back to life on the third day" (Roa Bastos 132).

The nature of his hallucinations gives us a definitive clue as to what has been foreclosed in the universe of this character, or, indeed, what series of events, or representations has been foreclosed. The Supreme, as drawn by Roa Bastos, has foreclosed the representative nature of political power. In his mind he does not conceive of himself as a person carrying a representative charge, that of the head of State; rather, he has accepted the State as his very person: "In their natural materials there breathes a political body, the State. He/I: it is our lungs that the entire country breathes through" (113). He has thus become a purely discursive entity, forced to totalize his discursive reality by constantly rewriting the realities around him: his political reality, the historical reality of his country, and his own personal, human reality.

In short, for the "truth" of Doctor Francia to be present in Colorado rhetoric as it is presented to Paraguayans requires a foreclosed system, such that the subject at the center of this system perceives his signifying system as an immediate reality; in other words, a psychotic subject. The depiction of the Supreme is thus an expression, at the subjective level, of a collective rendering of reality. Herein we can identify the logic behind the manifestations of the Supreme's paranoia, for any attempt to reject symbolic mediation—to fuse, as it were, the historical subject to the objective reality of political power—will result in a far more radical bifurcation between the two, and the emergence of that rejected representativity in the real.

The most pervasive example of this "return in the real" in the novel is the superegoic, haranguing voice that haunts the Supreme's thoughts from the very first page of the book. The voice appears in the dictator's most private thoughts, inscribing itself along the margins of his private notebooks, commenting on and criticizing his words. The Supreme flies back at it, angered by its constant nagging. He slips often and accuses the other of behavior that is remarkably revealing of his own.

Whoever you are, insolent corrector of my pen, you are beginning to annoy me. You don't understand what I write. You don't understand that the law is symbolic. Twisted minds are unable to grasp this. They interpret the symbols literally. And so you make mistakes and fill my margins with your scoffing self-importance. (100)

Ironically, it is the Supreme who is incapable of grasping the symbolic function of the law: that he is its representative, not its embodiment. The voice responds by indicting the Supreme for betraying the very revolution he claims to have led, sarcastically remarking that "in the old days you used to cry out in favor of sedition, and now you are crying out against it" (100). At times the "Yo" of "el Supremo's" divided subject identifies the voice as that of He, the master subject and imperial figure which he must represent. When this voice speaks it is "a mocking voice. Powerful. Fills the room. Falls on my fever. Rains down inside me. Great drops of molten lead" (92).

How can we fail to recognize this as the voice of Lacan's malevolent superego? Žižek also associates the superego with what he calls the Father of *jouissance*, that remainder of the paternal metaphor which cannot be integrated into the symbolic universe as the Name of the Father, or symbolic Law (*Looking Awry* 23). In other words, it is that kernel of unfettered aggressivity that is evacuated from the subject through the process of symbolic identification that returns as the superego, voicing its silent and massive injunction to impossible enjoyment.

Žižek brings this directly to bear on the social register, claiming that all civil society is founded on some “pathological act of violence” that the society must then conceal, either by means of a fantasy construction, such as the myth of the “social contract” (*For They Know* 205), or by foreclosing the event completely, at which time the event becomes a “vanishing mediator” enabling the construction of a seemingly complete symbolic order. Behind the enunciation of the Law, then, there lurks the presence of a repressed original crime. Since the Supreme’s political reality is a foreclosed system, this malicious, superegoic presence born at the origin of symbolic Law must return, not in the symbolic, as an ideological symptom, but in the real, as a hallucinated apparition or voice.

If this HE of political authority returns to the subject in the real it is, as we have shown, precisely because the Supreme has foreclosed the representative nature of political office. Rather than recognize the essential metaphor of political authority in which the individual represents the collectivity of a people’s power, the Supreme rejects this “castration,” becoming, instead, the embodiment of power, and, in fact, coterminous with the State itself.

This desire to embody the State would not be so unusual in and of itself, if it weren’t for its incommensurability with the rhetorical stance defining the Supreme’s own ego-ideal, namely, that of the French Enlightenment. As we can read in various accounts, including some that the compiler has quoted directly, the Supreme came to power at the behest of a congress of deputies, manipulating them first into declaring him a temporary dictator, and several years later, perpetual dictator until death. Yet the Supreme in Roa Bastos’s fiction claims that he was “elected by the people for life” (82) and elected “by the majority of our fellow citizens” (123). The political reality of much of Paraguayan history has, in fact, fallen into such a pattern, one in which the rhetoric of popular sovereignty belies the practice of rampant nepotism and rule by force.

This foreclosure of the link between democratic rhetoric and the real exercise of collective power is in evidence in the historiographical treatment of Francia as well. In Luis María Argaña’s analysis of the Francista ideology, we encounter once again the dictator’s devotion to the works of the French Enlightenment, especially Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Argaña identifies as an essential element of the National character a political consciousness oriented around the “general will,” or the will of the people, which he traces to the influence of Francia (101). By means of their assumption of this doctrine, the Paraguayan people achieved the status of “subjects of history” during the Francia regime, capable of altering its course, though only through the mediation of the dictator (101). He justifies this mediation as Paraguay’s particular variation on the Rousseauian social contract, in which the people take part in a voluntary pact to deposit their individual liberties in the care of the general will, such that their collective liberties might therein be protected.

Francia’s doctrine, which originates the “linea nacional,” is precisely the redefining of the general will as the will of the dictator. The One no longer represents the individual for another (to paraphrase Lacan’s formula for the signifier); such a representative function is foreclosed. The One becomes rather the very embodiment of the general will, the will of the collectivity of individuals. By taking this discourse at its word, Roa Bastos shows that the subject of such a foreclosed history must be a paranoid subject, which is to say, not a subject at all, but rather a body perceiving its own jouissance, the HE of the HE/I split, the Thing at the center of its historical, political, discursive self. The results of this foreclosure are not difficult to ascertain at a larger, societal level: it returns in the real for those invested in the system as the perception of the traitorous, anti-national liberal. That which we originally expel emerges in the form of an “other” who threatens to steal our precious, national enjoyment.

The return of the real is the appearance in the Supreme’s immediate reality of all that he has rejected to become the embodiment of the state: his own origins, in his myth of auto-creation; his

beliefs in democratic, representative government; his own, imperfect, human past as a hell-raising student, as a person who took pleasure in life. This massive presence, so at odds with the Supreme's conscious discursive efforts, slowly but inevitably invades the narrative, until, at the end, it consumes him completely. His first person narrative falters, and then dies, and is replaced by the second person, the accusatory voice in all its vituperative aggressivity. As the voice continues, it dedicates the last page of narrative (before the intrusion of the appendix) to describing the Supreme's living death, his decomposition, the hunger of his corpse, the eternal feasting of worms on his body. Yet we are reminded, in the very last sentence, that what we are reading is an account of a text: "(the remainder stuck together, illegible, the rest unable to be found, the worm-eaten letters of the Book hopelessly scattered)" (Roa Bastos 424). It is the text, this discursive representation itself, that undergoes the decay, that exists in a state of perpetual living-death, whose last words are interrupted while saying that all this is happening "because you didn't know. . . ." Didn't know what? Can we hazard our own final words? You are only still alive because you didn't know that you were dead.

### 3. Final Words

Since the unconscious, structured like a language, as Lacan loved to intone, is transindividual, the same or similar elements of a discursive entity can and do inhabit the minds of entire social sectors. In Paraguay, a political discourse puts an enormous effort into maintaining and strategically modifying a historical figure to bond its legitimacy to a sense of national identity. It is precisely here, in the feeling that supports nationalism, that the concept of *jouissance* is most pertinent. It is this feeling that can inspire fanatic obedience, kindle hatred towards outsiders, and maintain a line of political power far beyond the sway of rational argumentation.

When he published it at the heights of the Stroessner presidency, Roa Bastos's book critically interrogated an essential support of his country's authoritarian ideology. That ideology projected a specially doctored Dr. Francia based on a particular understanding of history that organized the *jouissance* of the people's political unconsciousness around a feeling of national identity. By recreating that political discourse in a fictional form that takes literally its foreclosure of the representative nature of political power, the novel unmasks the monstrous reality that animates the discursive construct. By taking Colorado rhetoric at its own word and by subjectifying the party's historicization of Francia, *I, the Supreme* reveals the psychotic underpinnings of authoritarian nationalism at the very point where its grasp is the tightest.

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