

---

## Reading the Writers: Hidden Meta-structures in the Modern Spanish American Novel

*John M. Lipski*

The spoken and written word exercises its fascination over reader and writer alike; from the earliest recorded specimens of literature have come indications of a preoccupation with words and meanings, names of objects, places and people, and the roots of words and expressions. Nor has such attention always been serious and scholarly, for many have sensed the ability of words to create domains of satire and witticism. Humor has been expressed both through and in the word, and the history of humor in the form-content dimension of literature is a fascinating one indeed. Verbal play is a human phenomenon which appears in early childhood and which, despite society's normative pressures, often persists into adulthood. When it arises in literature, pure verbal invention engenders all manner of linguistic and narrative games, based on the word's potential for polyvalence, the ability to enter into combination and reactions with diverse and virtually infinite subsystems of language. There are no limits to the number or variety of linguistic and narrative games that may be utilized in literature, save those imposed by the creative imagination, and particularly in recent years verbal play has assumed a prominent role in many literary works. In this note, one such pattern of evolution will be traced, in the contemporary Spanish American novel, often noted for its exuberant use of language. In addition to the obvious use of puns and other overt word games, the modern Spanish American novel exhibits numerous more subtle structures, games which pit the reader against the writer with rules sometimes defined only after the fact, if at all. The boundaries between reader and writer are being demolished and the reader, instead of being merely a spectator at a narrative event, is forced to become an active participant, a competitor, pitted not only against an individual author, but against the text as well, and its multiple interpretations. This often turns into a narrative hide-and-seek, as will be seen.

Narrative fiction has been relatively late in appearing in Spanish America. Some place its inception as late as the early 19th century. Regardless of the date chosen, humor and parody, both incidental and as major structuring devices, were comparatively slow to enter the Hispanic American narrative, perhaps because of the ecclesiastical nature of much of the early literature, coupled with the reported Spanish ban on the importation of secular litera-

ture into the colonies. With the independence of the Spanish American countries came a literary awakening which did not linger long in producing specimens of verbal games in the form of the novel, essay and story, but such manifestations, while springing from newly emancipated peoples, showed little if any innovation or departure from the European prototypes of the picaresque, the satire and the farce. Literary experimentation, not common in any part of the world, had to wait even longer before making a noticeable appearance in Spanish America. In this area literature was, and to a certain extent still is, dominated by the realist/naturalist traditions of 19th century Europe, and such highly traditional material does not readily lend itself to radical departures in means of expression. With the exception of a few early flickerings in the first part of the present century, the advent of literary experimentation had to wait until nearly the mid-point of the century, with the publication of such works as Leopoldo Marechal's *Adán Buenosayres* (1945), Juan Carlos Onetti's *La vida breve* (1950), Roberto Arlt's *Los siete locos* (1929) and *Los Lanzallamas* (1931), Adolfo Bioy Casares' *La invención de Morel* (1940), some of the early novels of Miguel Angel Asturias, and of course the short narrative masterpieces of Borges. In these works, verbal games and humor play minor roles, if they appear at all. Borges, for example, often uses sly, subtly ironic elements, and there are aspects of Arlt's works which in a bizarre way verge on slapstick, but there is a nearly total exclusion of openly displayed humor. Spanish American writers were preoccupied, explicitly or implicitly, with forming a "serious" body of literature free from colonial tinges; they established literary schools and published manifestos. There was no room for pure laughter in such enterprises, and it was only with the maturation of the Hispanic American narrative, including infusions of literary currents prevailing in Europe and the United States (Joyce, Beckett, Faulkner, Mann, etc.) that there occurred a liberation of the narrative. The creation of the new "Boom" novel has meant an unchaining of the literary word, creating the "novel of language."<sup>1</sup> Humor and verbal games are no longer excluded and discouraged in the new Spanish American experimental novel; indeed they often represent the central elements, although at times tempered by more "transcendental" motifs. The evolution of verbal games as a strategy has not been an instantaneous phenomenon, but has displayed signs of steady growth, a progressive loosening of traditional strangleholds, and the ever increasing expansion of literary consciousness.

With the publication of Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* in 1963, the "new" novel truly came of age, at least as far as the commercial and critical communities were concerned, although this novel did not spring forth fully developed, without predecessors, either among Cortázar's earlier works or among other works of Spanish American literature. *Rayuela* is one of the first "open" works in Spanish America<sup>2</sup> and verbal invention plays a central role. Cortázar expresses parody via the situations in which his characters are immersed and, more importantly, in the very verbal structure of the novel itself: the

"expendable" chapters, the multiple reading format, and the absurdity of self-criticism provided by Morelli, merely a surrogate for Cortázar himself. Many of these crucial aspects were repeated in the sequel novel *62*, and in the more recent *Libro de Manuel* and *Un tal Lucas*, but in the latter, words, the humor and playfulness at the verbal level, do not extend so obviously to the textual structure. Although acknowledging the early lead of Cortázar, many of the immediately following writers steered clear of humor and verbal games, and merely worked occasional scenes into otherwise mythical, somber and in some cases openly morose literary experiments. Exceptions are as rare as they are noteworthy, the prime cases being García Márquez' *Cien años de soledad* and Cabrera Infante's *Tres tristes tigres*. Cabrera Infante's well-known manual of verbal games is a tribute to pure linguistic invention, a work in which the word is subjected to nearly every possible trick and deformation, all for the purpose of showing the inherent emptiness of meaning, the lack of substance behind the verbal walls which enclose us. *Tres tristes tigres* is "open" in every respect, from the long paradigmatic lists of alternative forms to the uses to which the language (or Cuban dialect) is put in supposedly serious circumstances. García Márquez takes a different tack, creating the mythical universe of Macondo, where things are so new as to have to be named from the beginning, where girls float off to heaven in sheets, young men are surrounded by swarms of butterflies wherever they go, and people live to Biblical old ages. The novel represents the first major attempt after *Rayuela* to integrate the humor of the word with the humor of structure, for in *Cien años* one discovers at the end the ultimate joke: nothing is new, everything has been already recorded in the Sanskrit document left behind a century ago by the Gypsy Melquíades. The characters have been living, for the past hundred years or more under the illusion of freedom, of liberty from destiny, when the answer was literally before their noses all the time. García Márquez has added a meta-level above the wild verbal convolutions of *Tres tristes tigres*, since it is not only the language of *Cien años* that creates an ironic if not always humorous impression, but also the metalanguage represented by the document. The word has been augmented by two more subtle meta-levels of discourse, the first found in the pattern of verbal creation in *Tres tristes tigres* and the second added upon this basis, as represented by the meta-commentary of *Rayuela* and *Cien años de soledad*.<sup>3</sup> Other novels appearing since the time of *Cien años* share a similar approach to the use of language as a game, although in some instances the humorous aspect is subordinated to other narrative manipulations or disappears altogether. One thinks, for example, of Néstor Sánchez' *Nosotros dos*, dealing with the intimate confessions of an abandoned playboy, of Salvador Elizondo's *Farabeuf*, where Oriental torture is equated with occidental practices of medicine, and mixed with a frenzied and imperfect practice of divination, of Vicente Leñero's novels, including *Estudio Q*, *Los albañiles* and *El garabato*, of Fernando del Paso's *José Trigo*, where, as in *Tres tristes tigres*, pure verbal invention sustains the inner narrative.

The Spanish American narrative passed to a third level of meta-narrative with the novel *Abaddón el exterminador* by Ernesto Sábato. This novel, like *Rayuela*, deals with its own creation; Sábato acts as character in the text, discussing not only the writing of his previous works, but also the writing of *Abaddón* itself. This type of explicit reflexive portrayal goes one significant step beyond other works of creation such as *Rayuela* and *El garabato*, since the author himself is explicitly brought forth in this deliberate act of self-parody and self-awareness. The entire text of *Abaddón* is nothing more than an exercise in epistemological paradox, but adding an additional wrinkle to the dazzling displays mentioned earlier, for the reader now has to contend with the fact that the author himself has entered upon the scene in the dual role of character and creator. This is a reversion to the format of the *Quijote*, where Don Quijote and Sancho Panza contemplate the text of their previous adventures as supposedly narrated by Cide Hamete Benegeli. The latter individual, however, never appears directly in the text, nor does Cervantes, although he is mentioned, so that the reader is merely left with the tantalizing situation in which the characters seem about to read into the future, discovering in the possibly completed text that their destiny has already been prefigured and predetermined by the meta-world of the author (and of the reader). The element of parody in Sábato's novel, and also the way out of the epistemological labyrinth, comes from the somewhat veiled realization that, despite the evident paradox inherent in the author's playing the dual and seemingly impossible roles of creator and created, there are in fact subtle differences which partially resolve this paradox. Sábato introduces several "autobiographical" details into the text which, although having the appearance of totally factual recounting, are totally spurious. The two "Sábatos" are quite different from one another. This is a third metalevel, for Sábato the author has placed himself above Sábato the character (written without the diacritic accent), immersed in the creation of a novel which will also involve himself, all the while poking fun at purely autobiographical works and at critics who seek an autobiographical interpretation of all works.

It might seem that, although in theory the ascending series of metalevels could be extended to an arbitrarily high degree of narrative complexity, to do so would no longer be a literary innovation, but merely a fastidious repetition and elaboration of a hackneyed technical device. This conclusion is not entirely fallacious; one possible solution, however, lies in the creation of works which, instead of embodying a linear narrative array of metalevels, present a circular epistemological construction which allows for no exit. Such has been done, for example, by Cortázar in his stories "Continuidad de los parques" and "La noche boca arriba." The ultimate in embedded metalevels has apparently been reached by Leñero in *Estudio Q*, where the novel's devastating effect on the reader stems from the necessity to contemplate simultaneously an infinite number of embedded metalevels, clearly a cognitively impossible

task. A similar, although attenuated structure is also found in the same author's *Redil de ovejas*.<sup>4</sup>

Following the initial explosion of creative potential represented by the major novels of the Latin American Boom has come a new return to literary subtlety, in which the technical structures elaborated in the early novels have been augmented and modified in hitherto untried fashions. Some works, such as Del Paso's *Palinuro de México* and Lezama Lima's *Oppiano Licario*, continue the earliest traditions of pure verbal invention; others, like Fuentes' *Terra nostra*, carry the totalization concept to its ultimate limits. In many works, one notices a retreat from the verbal dazzling and excesses of the earlier period, a return to the more tightly structured narrative base and fewer overt epistemological gymnastics. Examples include Fuentes' *La cabeza de la Hidra*, Donoso's *Tres novelitas burguesas* and *Casa de Campo*, Leñero's *Los periodistas* and Cabrera Infante's *Vista del amanecer en el trópico*. Parts of the latter work, however, were presumably written much earlier, forming part of the original version of *Tres tristes tigres*, and the author's more recent *Exorcismos de estí(l)lo* harks back to the verbal games of his first novel.

In these works it is possible to discover continuations of earlier experimental patterns, woven into a fabric which is often superficially more traditional. At the same time there is an increasingly subtle use of metalevels, of more intricate textual structures. As a final telling stage in the progression of the self-constructing narrative, let us consider the case of Mario Vargas Llosa. Following the publication of his first three novels, Vargas Llosa seemed committed to pessimistic, Faulknerian novels of great narrative complexity. The appearance of *Pantaleón y las visitadoras*, with its lighthearted humor and its timely irreverence, took many readers and critics by surprise, and led some to speculate that Vargas Llosa was losing his master's touch. Viewed now with several years of hindsight, it is apparent that this novel is considerably more structured than was first believed, and that the narrative complexity has taken on different, more subtle, dimensions.<sup>5</sup> As if to put the readers to a further test of perceptiveness, Vargas Llosa has offered a new novel continuing the tonal levels established by *Pantaleón: La tía Julia y el escribidor*. The plot of the latter novel is exceedingly simple: it deals with the adolescent Vargas Llosa, lightly fictionalized in this undisguised autobiography, and his affair with his divorced aunt (by marriage only) Julia, a lady much older than he, whom he eventually marries, triggering a great family scandal. The parallel plot concerns Pedro Camacho, radio soap opera writer who is working for the same employers as Vargas Llosa. Camacho suffers a prolonged nervous breakdown, during which time he starts to mix up the plot lines of his various stories, and the characters and situations begin to migrate from one text to the next, dead characters are "resurrected" and at the end everything collapses into a single morass of undistinguishable narrative material.

Most surprising about the novel is the unabashed way in which Vargas

Llosa has incorporated intimate autobiographical details, including his relations with his first wife, whose name has not even been changed.<sup>6</sup> Gone are the mind boggling discontinuities of *La casa verde*, the mysterious identifications of *La ciudad y los perros*, or the shimmering complexity of *Conversación en La Catedral*. We find instead neatly delimited alternations between the relation of Vargas Llosa's adventures and excerpts from Camacho's radio serials. The novel is overtly humorous; both Camacho's extraordinary soap operas and Vargas Llosa's youthful episodes are fecund sources of laughter. In many ways, *La tía Julia y el escribidor* makes one think of *Pantaleón*, and one is led to look for more subtle elements of structure in this offering. Once more the writer has provided his readers with an intimate connection between narrative form and content, this time in the form of an increasingly subtle use of reflexive parody. *La tía Julia* contains numerous autobiographical elements, so many in fact as to shock the reader. Unlike the trap laid by Sábato, the factual details are nearly all true. There is a trap here, however, or rather an unrevealed bit of information which, when gleaned from the text, adds a further facet to the total interpretation. One of the aspects of the narrative track involving Vargas Llosa's youth concerns his own attempts at writing publishable fiction. Throughout the course of the novel, the young man successively produces a series of partially or totally described stories of varying but generally mediocre quality. None are ever published, although we are told at the end that in subsequent years the author did become a successful writer (of course!). During the earlier period covered by the novel, Vargas Llosa's literary attempts are presented parallel to the continual outpourings of Camacho's fertile, if overly sensationalistic, pen. The significant difference is that, while Camacho's stories appear directly in the text, Vargas Llosa's narrative attempts are never directly reproduced. Instead we are presented with a commentary, by Vargas Llosa himself and by the friends and relatives who read the successive versions and revisions. Vargas Llosa can never settle on a single theme for his writing, but rather jumps from one episode to the next, hoping each will lead to the literarily valid exercise he seeks. Each narrative is a thinly disguised reworking of a situation from real life; all attempts end in dismal failure. In striking contrast is the virtual wellspring of imagination coming from Pedro Camacho, who fabricates his stories from whole cloth, utilizing, so he claims, nearly nothing from real life. Thus Vargas Llosa (the author of the novel) has added another, partially hidden, metalevel of autobiographical commentary, regarding his early literary creations. The early attempts are of little value because they lean too heavily on reality and too little on creative imagination; the endlessly churned out stories of Camacho are equally worthless for the opposite reason: unrestrained imagination without the creative shaping tempered by daily reality. It is only by synthesizing the two extremes that a lasting literature will result, a combination which the real author was to achieve in his mature works. The two types of embedded literature, Vargas

Llosa's attempts and Camacho's stories, are *both* metacommentaries on literature, on Vargas Llosa's literary career; the entire novel is a metaphor, a metacommentary tracing the development of Mario Vargas Llosa as writer. Vargas Llosa is able to present a synthesis of two parts of his own nascent creativity which eventually coalesced into the successful novelist. The most significant aspect of the text is not the revelation of specific plot details or individual attempts but rather the very fact of embedded self-parody: it is the reader of the novel reading Vargas Llosa the author, who is reading Vargas Llosa the character, who is reading both himself and Pedro Camacho, which is to say Vargas Llosa the author once more. This is a fourth metalevel, but not merely an extension of the earlier mentioned levels. By means of this twist, this inversion of roles of creator and created at the last minute, Vargas Llosa creates a text which, by virtue of its form and its very existence, describes the author's literary genesis.<sup>7</sup>

The metastructure in the contemporary Spanish American novel is an intellectual stance, a sort of self-parody at the same time as the indulging of a form of literary voyeurism. Each author has bared the creation of his works to the reader, not in a serious fashion but rather in a laughing accusation in which the indicting finger finally comes to rest pointing at the author himself. The reader is no longer a passive receptacle for the author's finished product; the consumer society is neatly sidestepped through creation of a system which elicits the reader's active presence in the act of reading. Not only is the reader aware at each point of the moment of creation, but he is necessary for this moment to come to fruition; the reader is a foil, a mirror in which the author, faced with the need for self-parody, may see himself. Mirrors are at once the embodiment of tragedy and comedy. In the metastructures of Spanish American literature, the reader reflects the author's act of creation, bounces it around as in a prism, and as co-conspirator in the burlesque allows it to emerge again, often in the form of laughter. This is, to be sure, a unique form of laughter, not suited for everyone, but the growing complexity of society and its functions have called forth a concomitant complexity in literary expression. Why have such a large number of authors chosen self-parody as a vehicle for self-expression? Speculation is as tantalizing as it is premature, given a trend still very much alive. It is clear that, during the last few decades, major epistemological changes have occurred, changes which bring into question uniqueness, individual transcendence and determinacy. All areas are affected: science, literature, art, theology, philosophy and historical thought. As a result of such profound modifications of our perception of the cosmos, the relative configurations of elements in artistic appreciation have undergone radical shifts, many of these involving the role of creator, creation and spectator.

Is this as far as things will go? Will the Spanish American narrative continue escalating the series of metalevels in its search for the ultimate novelistic

interplay of forces? As Buckminster Fuller stated, "the difference between animal brains and the human mind lies specifically in man's unique ability to generalize to progressively compounding degrees of abstraction."<sup>8</sup> Theory imposes no limits; only man's need to be entertained, to free himself through the freeing of his language, will provide the answer.

#### UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

1. This term has been used by Carlos Fuentes, *La nueva novela hispanoamericana* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1969), p. 20.

2. In the sense of Umberto Eco, *Opera Aperta* (Milano: Bompiani, 1962). Essentially, an open work admits of no definite "ending," but rather invites the participation of the audience for its continuation to arbitrary limits.

3. García Márquez has also carried out this same technique, with less subtlety, in his latest novel *El otoño del patriarca*, where the structure of the text reinforces the inherent thematic elements, namely the crumbling of the already decadent dictatorship. See J. Lipski, "Embedded dialogue in *El otoño del patriarca*" *The American Hispanist*, Vol. 2, no. 14 (1977), 9-12.

4. In "Continuidad de los parques" a man reads a novel about an assassination, while it turns out that he is reading about his own destiny, which is culminated at the end of the story. "La noche boca arriba" deals with the arbitrary boundary between dream and reality, with the character's consciousness oscillating between the two poles; at the end, although the "dream" stage is given as the final one, the epistemological question is left open, *Estudio Q*, superficially dealing with the filming of a television soap opera about its own creation, eventually involves the trick of mirrors reflected in mirrors . . . etc., an infinitely descending series of metalevels which entraps the characters as well as the author and the reader, in the webs of inexorable destiny. *Redil de ovejas* makes use of imperfectly indicated flashback and similarly-named characters to create a nearly circular structure.

5. See for example Raymond Williams, "Two organizing principles in *Pantaleón*" in Mario Vargas Llosa: *A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. C. Rossman and A. Friedman (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1978), pp. 76-87.

6. For example, in the same volume cited in fn. 5, an interview between Vargas Llosa and José Miguel Oviedo, pp. 152-65; also José Miguel Oviedo, "*La tía Julia y el escribidor* or the coded self-portrait" on pp. 166-81.

7. Significantly enough, Vargas Llosa chooses as the book's epigraph a quote from Salvador Elizondo, in which the author's viewing himself creating himself is mentioned: "Escribo. Escribo que escribo; Mentalmente me veo escribir que escribo y también puedo verme ver que escribo. Me recuerdo escribiendo ya y también viéndome que escribía . . . también puedo imaginarme escribiendo que ya había escrito que me imaginaba escribiendo que había escrito que me imaginaba escribiendo que me veo escribir que escribo . . ."

8. R. Buckminster Fuller, "Man's Changing Role in Universe," in I. Hassan, ed., *Liberations: New Essays on the Humanities in Revolution* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 197-213 [p. 207].