

**THE  
ANALYSIS  
OF  
LITERARY  
TEXTS  
CURRENT  
TRENDS  
IN  
METHODOLOGY**

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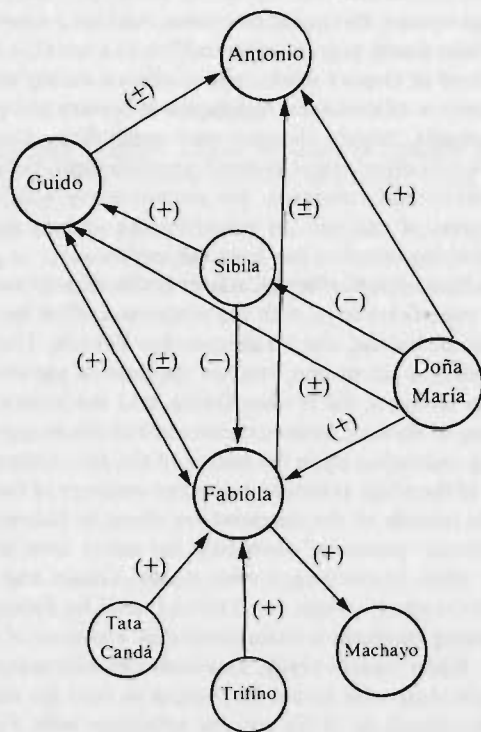
## SPLIT SIGNIFIERS IN *LA PASION DE URBINO*

John M. Lipski

Among the lesser known specimens of the *nueva narrativa latinoamericana* figures *La pasión de Urbino*, by the Cuban Lisandro Otero. Connoisseurs of Cuban literature perhaps recall this work as the novel which lost the Biblioteca Breve prize to Cabrera Infante's *Tres tristes tigres*, but in most instances when Otero's name is even mentioned at all as a contemporary novelist it is in connection with his earlier novel *La situación* or his more recent montage venture *En ciudad semejante*. And yet *La pasión de Urbino*, whose fewer than ninety pages barely qualify it as a novel, is by far the most tightly structured of Otero's works, and it offers a variety of opportunities for the employment of structural techniques of literary analysis. The text is extremely compact, highly charged with symbolism, connotation, and allegory—all topics deserving of in-depth investigations. Nonetheless, in the interest of brevity and coherence, the present study will focus solely on structural aspects of the text, in particular the various deformations to which the signifying function has been subjected.

Banned in Spain due to official Catholic censorship, *La pasión de Urbino* deals, on the superficial level, with the adulterous affair between a Cuban priest, Antonio de Urbino, and his sister-in-law Fabiola. Their relationship, always apparently a warm one, reached the heat of passion during a trip to Florence by Antonio, his brother Guido, and the latter's wife, Fabiola. Upon returning to Havana, both Antonio and Fabiola engage in a process of soul-searching and reflect upon the nature of sin, the existence of God, and the dual role of the priest as human being and emissary of God. Intertwined with the main threads of the narrative are direct or indirect references to several peripheral "passions," including the secret love of the Urbino's housekeeper, Sibila Mayerburg, for her master, Guido, and the adolescent infatuation of the black servant boy Trifino Candá for Fabiola. The overall web of conflicting emotions is characterized by a number of non-reciprocal relationships: Sibila regards Guido as a basically mild-mannered and non-aggressive individual who would be content to tend his stamp collection but for the machinations of his socially ambitious wife. Fabiola, in turn,

regards Guido with ambivalence, and feels that she has, in fact, been responsible for saving him from a life of mediocrity and destitution by forcing him to assume control of his late father's business emporium. Guido presumably loves his wife in his own rather passive fashion. Doña María, Fabiola's mother-in-law, considers Fabiola to be guiltless and regards Sibila as a conniving woman set on luring Guido away from his lawful wife and family. Trifino, in turn, idolizes Fabiola, creating an almost saint-like mental image of his patroness, as does his aged mother, Tata Candá, who tended the Urbino brothers from their birth. Fabiola lavishes her affection on her sole child, Machayo, in a bizarre, over-protective fashion that repels Sibila. The feelings of Antonio Urbino are left unspecified by the author, although one is left to assume the details of his "passion"; Antonio is thus set apart as an isolated pole in a conglomerate of emotional relations, the recipient of overly stated feelings, but himself excluded from the expression of such explicit emotions. Antonio may thus be considered the structural center of the novel, about whom all the other relations revolve. These relations may be depicted schematically as follows: (+) indicates positive emotion; (-) indicates negative emotion; ( $\pm$ ) indicates ambivalence; and the arrow signals the direction of the emotion in question.



The second half of the novel presents the most striking technical innovations, which are also inextricably bound up with the narrative structure of the text. Reference is made, at about the half-way point (p. 45) to Antonio's supposed embezzlement of stocks from the Urbino business, a robbery discovered by the company bookkeeper and reported in a memo which Guido is keeping for blackmail purposes. Guido's opinion is that Antonio should leave the country immediately, provided with money and a passport which the former is willing to furnish, in order to repair the tarnish to the family honor. During Guido's absence, Antonio sneaks into his brother's study and forces open a drawer which he supposes contains the auditor's report. The drawer contains, in addition to the memo, a loaded pistol, which falls to the floor and discharges, killing Antonio. The following chapter begins, "La muerte del padre Antonio no alteró la bien establecida rutina de la casa Santacruz." Two pages later, however, we are suddenly confronted with the unheralded sentence "El lunes por la mañana el padre Antonio acudió como de costumbre a la casa Santacruz," and the narrative continues, as though the earlier scene had never taken place. The suspicion that author Otero is tampering with narrative reality is further reinforced by two other "deaths" and subsequent "resurrections" in the remainder of the novel, each event with its concomitant plot details. The second part of the novel begins with an argument between Antonio and Guido in which the former complains about mismanagement of his inheritance through Guido's business ventures and announces his decision to leave the country. Guido in turn replies that "No estimamos que existan razones sólidas para esa decisión," to which Antonio retorts, somewhat apocryphally, "No entienden nada. No saben de qué se trata." Guido's comeback is "Debo hacerte notar, Antonio, que eres el primero de los Urbino que abandona sus deberes." Two chapters later, Guido and Antonio meet in their sleeping mother's bedroom, where the former accuses the latter of the robbery and insists that he leave the country. The following chapter begins with the identical opening paragraph, but this time Doña María awakens and, while Guido leaves on an errand, announces to Antonio that Guido is robbing the company and plans to run off with Sibila. The subsequent chapter, two pages later, returns to the previous situation, with Antonio informing Fabiola that the bishop has denied him permission to leave. This scene is followed, several pages later, by one in which Fabiola, portrayed as Jezebel, kills Antonio by beating him over the head with a crucifix in the sacristy of his church. In the next chapter, Antonio, during an interview with the dying bishop, is given permission to leave Cuba, and upon leaving the audience, he encounters his own funeral on the street, as if in a dream. A few pages further along, Antonio, after reviewing the unhappy events which have led him to the decision, stabs himself to death, after which Guido and Sibila run off, as if fulfilling Doña María's prophecy, and Fabiola is rumored to be sleeping with Trifino. On the following page, Antonio appears again, once more without any overt textual indication that anything is amiss, and the novel

ends with Antonio, Fabiola and Guido planning a trip to Florence "to get to know one another better."

It is thus apparent that the novel, whose brevity and innocuous beginning conceal a great inner complexity, represents a structural pattern which departs from the norm in traditional Spanish narrative fiction and even stands apart from other current Latin American novels. The introduction of the multiple versions of Antonio's death, and the surrounding events, appears in the text without any overt signals, being inserted into an otherwise coherent narrative flow. The startling effect engendered by such manipulations results in a loss of textual continuity and creates a disconnected text which may be reconstructed only by each individual reader using the interpretation he has chosen for himself, for the author provides no further clues as to the unravelment of the puzzle. "¿Dónde termina el sueño y empieza la vigilia?" asks the publisher's introduction to the novel, and the question is indeed pertinent to an overall interpretation of this most unusual literary creation.

In order to approach the technical fabric of the novel, we shall have recourse to two notions from structural linguistics—one, the "syntagm-paradigm" dichotomy and the other, the nature of the signifying function. The term "paradigm" refers to the underlying system of possibilities, or related elements, which may be placed in a single slot or position. In the case of a verb, for example, the paradigm is the entire conjugation, while in the system of food, the paradigm would be all those items that are interchangeable on the menu for a particular course, such as entrée, dessert, and so forth. The "syntagm," on the other hand, represents the concrete realization of the paradigm, in which one choice is made from the paradigm or system for each slot of the syntagm. Jakobson<sup>1</sup> has used the term "simultaneity" to characterize the paradigm, since all potential values are simultaneously present until one is chosen. On the other hand, the word "successivity" best describes the syntagm, for elements occur one after the other in succession in order to form a corpus of data. Applied to a narrative, the paradigm refers to the underlying set of all possible variants on a particular set of semantic structures, whereas the syntagm is the concrete text under discussion. It is not uncommon, however, for the paradigm to be in some sense extended onto the syntagm—i.e., for several associational entities to appear in an actual text. In addition to obvious cases such as metaphor, rhyme, and puns, a variety of other creative possibilities exist. Roland Barthes notes that it is "as if perhaps there were here a junction between the field of aesthetics and the defections from the semantic system. . . . It therefore seems that it is always on the frontiers of the two planes that creation has a chance to occur."<sup>2</sup>

It is not uncommon, among modern Latin American novels, to encounter examples of paradigmatic overlapping or interpenetration in which the author has presented within the expanse of a single text, paradigmatic variants which would normally entail mutual exclusion. The use of such a literary device runs the gamut from Cabrera Infante's *Tres*

*tristes tigres*, in which the text abounds with word games, through Vargas Llosa's *Conversación en la Catedral*, in which the constantly shifting narrative perspective provides a prismatic view of reality, to Donoso's *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*, in which studied use of ambiguity and contradiction has been employed to create a novel and its antithesis within the confines of the same text. In each case, the structural function of the paradigmatic overlapping is somewhat different, and yet there remains a fundamental unity of purpose, which is that the reader follow for himself the process of authorial creation and reconstruct a version of the text under consideration, or perhaps several versions.

The text of *La pasión de Urbino* is clearly characterized by a number of instances of paradigmatic overlapping, so many in fact that the entire text may be regarded as nothing but a set of juxtaposed paradigmatic variants. An enumeration of the various paradigmatic possibilities presented in the text will therefore facilitate an overall structural interpretation.

The most obvious point of paradigmatic interpenetration involves the multiple versions of the death of Antonio Urbino. At no point in the text is it made clear whether these events are the result of the dreams or imagination of Antonio, Fabiola, Doña María, or one of the other characters or whether perhaps one of the death scenes is real and the others merely hypothetical alternatives. Each death scene and Antonio's subsequent returns to the pages of the narrative is introduced without reference to altered states of consciousness or cognition, and even a shifting temporal reference is absent from the textual meanderings, except in the final chapter, where the narrative turns upon itself like a circle and returns to the events preceding the novel's opening chapters. Thus the portrayal of Antonio's death, in each case the violent result of his passion, provides the central framework for the novel, around which are interlaced the remaining paradigmatic sections.

Inseparably related to the death scenes are the various versions of the embezzlement, in which Antonio and/or Guido are implicated, as well as the conflicting opinions of Fabiola, Sibila, and Trifino and Antonio's plans to leave the country, which are alternately permitted or thwarted by Guido and/or the bishop. Such events all occur embedded in the larger context of a death scene and must thus be analyzed in relation to the larger frame of reference of the entire text.

In the course of Antonio and Fabiola's conversations and self-analyses, a number of fundamental religious and moral tenets are brought up for discussion, and in several instances Antonio is led to offer contradictory remarks, which indicate the internal torments which ravage him and offer yet another instance of multiple paradigmatic variants in the same text. About halfway through the novel (p. 51) Antonio, after some preliminary breast-beating about his affair with Fabiola while the two are sunbathing on a beach, makes the remark that despite all appearances to the contrary, sensuality is not a sin. This statement, coming from the mouth of the tormented priest, sounds more like wishful thinking than a carefully reasoned opinion, and the ensuing discussion touches on the dichotomy of good and

evil: Antonio declares, "El hombre concentra el Bien y el Mal en una sola entidad. Aun Cristo no pudo evitarlo. Al expulsar a los mercaderes les hizo un Mal que era un Bien para otros." The reverie is broken by Fabiola's remarking as to what the extremely chaste and traditional Doña María would think if she knew of their actions at that moment.

Somewhat further along, during Antonio's audience with the bishop, the former remarks, somewhat paradoxically, "Todo se llegará a entender. Nada será comprendido," upon which the bishop explains the magical significance of the circle: "El rectángulo es categórico, explícito, toda una obvia declaración. El círculo, en cambio, es infinito, pasa y repasa sobre sí mismo, no termina nunca ni empieza en ningún lugar." With these words the bishop has characterized the structure of the novel itself which, as noted above, is completely circular, offering a linearly ordered paradigmatic display, turning about itself like a ferris wheel, in which each of the passengers passes successively before the eyes of the observer, in an eternally recurring progression. Following the bishop's remarks, Antonio replies, "La Iglesia tiene las fuerzas necesarias para aceptar el desafío del círculo." Again, this statement represents a fundamental paradox, for neither Antonio nor the bishop, both representatives of the Church, seems able to fully confront "el desafío del círculo." Antonio is torn by doubts regarding the existence of God, the nature and boundaries of sin, and his quite corporeal relations with Fabiola. The bishop, in his old age and moribund state, has lapsed into a mysticism which borders on sorcery, speaking of circles and cabals, a state which appears to alarm even Antonio. It is at this point in the novel that one may claim to have reached the epicenter, for it is this fundamental dichotomy, which is never resolved in the novel's endless circular progression, that defines the narrative fabric of the text. On the following page Antonio remarks, "Nuestro reino no es de este mundo," to which the bishop replies, "Es y no es."

Another related pattern concerns Fabiola's supposed infidelity to Guido. Aside from her rather bizarre relationship with Antonio, she is not demonstrated to be an adultress; rather, the text contains several contradictory passages which form a dynamic tension or opposition characterizing Fabiola's dual nature, both toward Antonio and toward other men. Towards the beginning of the novel (p. 12) Fabiola thinks, "¿Cómo podía recibir el cuerpo de Dios con tantos estigmas sin purificar? ¿Por qué Guido y no otro? Y ¿por qué los otros?" The following pages contain an unusual interchange between Antonio and Fabiola:

Recuerda que no debes tener amistad con hombre alguno—aconsejó el sacerdote.

—¿Y contigo?

—No soy un hombre.

—Sí eres.

—No olvides quiénes somos.

—No lo olvido.

Two chapters later, Antonio accuses Fabiola of infidelity to Guido, an

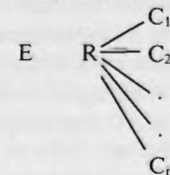
insinuation which she flatly denies. The next chapter begins with the passage:

¿Por qué dijo aquello el padre Antonio? ¿Por qué mintió? ¿Por qué quiso calumniar su probada castidad? Ella no se había contaminado jamás con el contacto de otro varón que no fuera aquel a que Dios la destinó. ¿Por qué el padre Antonio dijo la verdad tan brutalmente? ¿Por qué la enfrentó, de repente, a su lascivia?

Here we are confronted once again with the basic split in Fabiola's nature; whether or not she committed adultery in reality is irrelevant. The significant point is the constant tension between Fabiola and Antonio and also the ambivalent nature of her relations with Guido, which lead her to her disastrous encounters with Antonio and perhaps with other men.

In order to probe more deeply into the function of the paradigmatic interpenetrations in *La pasión de Urbino*, it is necessary to briefly discuss the nature of the linguistic sign. According to Saussure<sup>4</sup> a sign is composed of two elements, the "signifier" and the "signified," which are related by the sign function itself. Thus a sign is in fact a dynamic entity that creates meaning by its very existence. Hjelmslev<sup>5</sup> symbolized a signifying system as a plane of expression *E* and a plane of content *C* united by a relation *R*; thus, each such system may be depicted as *E R C*. Hjelmslev and Barthes<sup>6</sup> later considered the possibility of staggered systems—that is, systems whose plane of expression, or content, or both, were in themselves entire signifying systems; a system whose expression plane is a signifying system is called a "connotative semiotic," while one whose content plane is a complete system of signs is a "metasemiotic." Other, more complex systems have also been discussed, particularly with respect to certain works of literature,<sup>7</sup> and there is in theory no limit to the degree of complexity that can be attained by a set of signs.

Of central significance to the present endeavor is the possibility for bifurcation in the process of signification.<sup>8</sup> The most commonly noted bifurcation results in a split in the signified, or the content plane of a semiotic system; such, for example, is the case with various works of Alfred Jarry, and may be graphically represented as:

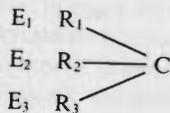


Put in simpler terms, a split in the plane of content means that the plane of expression, in this instance the text, does not refer to a unique referent on the plane of content, but rather is linked to several. An example would be the title of the novel under consideration: *La pasión de Urbino*. Superficially, one may take this title, representing the plane of expression to have as referent the relationship between Antonio and Fabiola although the

"passion" is stated almost exclusively from the latter's viewpoint. It is also possible, however, to include in the same sign the feelings of Sibila for Guido, as well perhaps, as Trifino's love for Fabiola. Thus the normally unique referent of the title has been ruptured to admit a number of other elements on the plane of content. The structural function of this multiplication of signifieds is to offer an implicit relationship among superficially disparate entities and thereby to create a tighter narrative foundation.

The reverse process, i.e., the possibility of a split signifier, has rarely been mentioned explicitly, perhaps because in the most common occurrences to do so would be trivial. In a normal text, there are frequently a number of references to the same person, place or event; for example, each time a particular character is named, one may add a further signifier to the list of occurrences, each of which is related to a single signified, who is the character himself. It is in fact the absence of such multiple signifiers that would be bizarre, for texts are developed and plots are woven through repeated reference. There are, however, more interesting possibilities, in which the split signifiers play a non-trivial role.

In *La pasión de Urbino*, the use of multiple paradigmatic variants gives rise to a series of split signifiers, but in a fashion radically different from the trivial configurations mentioned above. Let us take as an example the most striking case, the supposed death of Antonio Urbino. Clearly, it is impossible for a man to experience death more than once, regardless of the circumstances; therefore, we must postulate that at least two of the three death scenes depicted in the novel are, in fact, devoid of real content as applied to Antonio. The precise nature of these spurious scenes is open to interpretation, but in any case they allow the reader to participate in the construction of the labyrinth of relations which describes the narrative structure of the novel. Moreover, it is entirely possible, given the circular structure of the text, that Antonio does not meet death in *any* of the scenes listed in the novel, but rather that all three descriptions are purely hypothetical, serving ancillary functions in the development of the narrative. Whatever the case may be, however, it may be deduced that the actual signifying function in each of the death scenes is in some sense distinct from the other two, for it is impossible for a single signified or content element to be "referred" to by mutually contradictory signifiers. In order to accommodate the split signifiers within the general semiotic framework of the narrative, it is consequently necessary to posit not only multiple signifiers but also multiple relations of signification between the plane of expression and the plane of content. Schematically, this configuration is:



In each instance the "meaning" attached to the signifier denoting the death of Antonio Urbino is different because a separate reality is defined in each scene, and it is impossible to force the individual frames of reference to coincide, even for a moment.

Another example of a split signifier occurs near the beginning of the novel, when Fabiola sits in church, looking at a crucifix and pondering her relations with Guido and Antonio. As she stares at the cross, the face of Christ is suddenly replaced by that of Guido, in all its details, and later returns to the face of Christ. While it is hinted at that this hallucination is the result of Fabiola's feelings of guilt about her (real or imagined) adultery, the fact nevertheless remains that, as expressed in the text, the content level signified, i.e., the image of the crucifixion, is depicted by two signifiers, the face of Christ and the face of Guido Urbino. The relations which link these signifiers to the single signified must therefore be of two different natures: one, a straightforward reference to the normal image associated with a crucifix; the other, a hallucinatory and allegorical relation which links Guido's face to the same image.

Split signifiers also figure in the various paradoxes posed by Antonio and Fabiola. For example, although the true nature of Fabiola's adultery is never textually revealed, the novel contains a split signifier which alternately affirms and denies the possibility of infidelity. One may also include at this point the paradoxical views characterizing Antonio's religious vocation. Originally, Antonio was not drawn into the priesthood by a true religious vocation. Rather, he was forced by his mother, who had made a promise to the Virgin of Lourdes during a serious childhood illness which almost claimed Antonio's life. At one point, Antonio tells Fabiola that he actually accepted the spiritual life of the priesthood for a while in the seminary, but his later views are strikingly distinct from those expected of a man of God. Thus Antonio goes through a series of spiritual oscillations, alternating between the poles of spiritualism and faith in God and an antagonistic agnosticism that not only condones sensuality but also taints Antonio's entire life with unmitigated cynicism. Both elements of the figure of Antonio are depicted in the text without overt indication of the transition from one state to the other. Therefore, we must consider this dually portrayed aspect of Antonio to be yet another example of a split signifier.

*La pasión de Urbino* is in reality not one novel but rather several paradigmatically related but nonetheless distinct and logically incompatible narratives. The rather extraordinary use of paradigmatic overlapping has given rise to split signifiers, in which the normally unique relation between expression and content in a narrative is ruptured along the axis of expression. As an independent literary device, the paradigmatic interpenetration of the syntagmatic flow of the narrative would tend to produce a series of mutually independent works, but the unifying force provided by the split signifiers with unitary signifieds serves to bind the paradigmatic alternatives into a single coherent text. As well as containing a number of individual signs, a literary text may in itself be considered a closed semiotic system.

*La pasión de Urbino* is, through the use of multiple signifiers and signifying relations, provided with a ready means of uniting the several disparate narrative propositions. It is the splitting of the relations between expression and content, rather than the mere juggling of elements on one plane or the other, that gives *La pasión de Urbino* its unique structure, and it is this semiotic innovation which provides a vitalizing force in what would otherwise be a rather absurd literary venture.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>R. Jakobson & M. Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1956), pp. 58-81; R. Jakobson, *Studies on Child Language and Aphasia* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 49-94.

<sup>2</sup>R. Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, tr. A. Lavers & C. Smith (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), pp. 86-88.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. J. Lipski, "Paradigmatic overlapping in *Tres tristes tigres*," *Dispositio* 1 (1976).

<sup>4</sup>F. de Saussure, *A Course in General Linguistics*, tr. W. Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959).

<sup>5</sup>L. Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, tr. F. J. Whitfield (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961).

<sup>6</sup>Barthes, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup>Cf. in particular M. Arrivé, "Structuration et destruction du signe dans quelques textes de Jarry" in *Essays de Sémiotique Poétique*, ed. A. J. Greimas (Paris: Larousse, 1972), pp. 64-79; also *Les Langages de Jarry* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1972).

<sup>8</sup>The possibility of bifurcation on either the expression or the content plane is a direct violation of the "First Canon of Symbolism" of C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1923), p. 88. The First Canon states that "one symbol stands for one and only one referent." In the realm of literature, however, it is not necessary that such characteristics of the physical universe apply at all times. Moreover, even in the real world, recent work in physics indicates the existence of topological singularities or "black holes" in the universe, around which the normal laws of physics break down, causality may be reversed, and, in effect, anything can happen. Cf. S. W. Hawking & G. F. R. Ellis, *The Large Scale Structure of Space-Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).