

VICENTE LEÑERO: NARRATIVE EVOLUTION AS RELIGIOUS SEARCH

Prize-winning Mexican writer Vicente Leñero is a man of many talents and ideas. In addition to his life as a journalist he is the author of several plays and a group of innovative novels, all of which (with the possible exception of the factual chronicle *Los periodistas*) deal with man's search for destiny and identity, particularly as regards the fixing of religious belief.¹ Leñero is a Catholic, a fact which becomes apparent upon reading any of his novels, and since the combination of actively practicing Catholic and progressive-minded journalist/intellectual is comparatively rare in Mexico, many critics and colleagues have sought the easy pigeonhole of 'Catholic writer,' as if no more need be said. Leñero, while not disavowing his convictions, has nonetheless attempted to counteract this image,² and even a cursory glance at his works reveals that Leñero does not use his religious beliefs as a basis for uncritical pontificating. To the contrary, all of his works bespeak a penetrating and critical view of the paradoxical position in which he finds himself, and the entirety of the intertext which he has produced is itself an eloquent statement of the author's search for an identity and for an escape from the inexorable destiny which seems to await all men. For Leñero, the relations between religious and literary tendencies have created nearly insoluble problems: «La literatura chocaba con el mundo religioso y, más que eso, con el mundo moral que uno va asimilando y conformando internamente.»³

In the case of Leñero, it is not only the themes of his works which suggest a striving and longing, but also the structural devices of which the narrative is formed. In the interest of a comprehensive portrayal of the development, in Leñero's works, of the structural reinforcement of inner search, we shall briefly examine those novels in which this search may be clearly discerned. Of interest is not only the manner in which Leñero has employed linguistic and metalinguistic structures to complement thematic elements, but also the chronological evolutions of these techniques and the epistemological configurations they entail, which offers an insight into Leñero's literary development.

Leñero's narrative evolution really begins with his first novel *La voz adolorida* (1961),⁵ later reissued in the revised version *A fuerza de palabras* (1967).⁶ Because of the dual chronology of this novel, it would appear to present difficulties in tracing the evolution of Leñero's narrative style, but in reality the changes between the two versions are few and mostly of a stylistic and editorial nature. It is therefore feasible to adopt as a beginning point the earlier *La voz adolorida*, which from a structural point of view may be considered a precursor to the mainstream of Leñero's novelistic experiments. In this work the author had not yet begun to work with narrative innovations or epistemological paradoxes in any significant way. The format of the short novel, that of the monologue of a mentally ill young man, appears directly influenced by Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*,⁷ but without the discontinuous structural jumps of the latter novel, which will not appear in Leñero's works until *Estudio Q* and particularly *Redil de ovejas*. The narrative differences between *La voz adolorida* and *A fuerza de palabras* are few: in the latter work the rambling style is attenuated somewhat by the elimination of many instances of the conjunction *y*.⁸ The literary style of the first-person narrator, Enrique, is also toned up a bit, so that he sounds less desperately mad and more sophisticated. The plot lines remain the same: the confused and mentally ill young man, addressing his thoughts to a doctor (who in the revised work is merely referred to as 'usted'); the frustrated old spinster aunts who keep the young man trapped in a shadow world that will later resurface in Donoso's *El obscuro pájaro de la noche*;⁹ the mysterious and ambiguous deaths of Enrique's father, mother, wife and son; his 'rescue' from the asylum in Puebla by his friend Raúl Zetina, and so forth.

There is a clear religious search in *La voz adolorida*, encountered on nearly every page. The narrator/protagonist Enrique suffers from religious guilt, tormented by false confessions he has made and dominated by the fanatic behavior of his aunts, and the oppressive guidance of Padre Manuel. He states that «la enfermedad no está en los huesos ni en la sangre ni en la piel restirada y más restirada cada vez de tanto sufrir, sino que está más adentro. Está en los que no la tienen; está en los que tratan de curarla» (p. 36), which is changed, in *A fuerza de palabras*, to «la lepra del Evangelio continuará inoculando seres inocentes. Porque la enfermedad no está donde ustedes la buscan . . . está en el alma de los que dicen no sufrir enfermedad alguna, pobres tontos investigadores y sabios.» (p. 26)

The search also takes place on a more abstract level, with Enrique's endless attempts to rescue his son from his aunts' house, where he has supposedly been locked up (in reality he died shortly after birth) in the same basement where Enrique himself was locked up as a child. This search, forming the backbone of the narration, is explicitly equated with an act of redemption: «Me di cuenta de que mi vida ya no tenía más objeto que el de realizar un acto supremo, el último acto de mi voluntad, la redención absoluta, el heroísmo sublime: venir a México para rescatar de la prisión, de la

casa de San Angel, a mi hijo de siete años» (p. 95). Enrique is constantly searching: for his dead wife, for his son, for his own identity in the midst of the confusing and maddening world in which he has been thrust. At this early point in Leñero's narrative development, the textual structures do not contribute as much to the reinforcement of the religious search as they will in the subsequent novels: the only noteworthy characteristic of the text of *La voz adolorida* is the insistent and repetitious monologue, which in reality is almost a single sentence. This repetition, endlessly moving but going nowhere, is punctuated by the continual reappearance of key words, the «auto de sesenta mil pesos,» the «mastuerzos del jardín,» Raúl and his «amigos niños,» and so forth. In *A fuerza de palabras* Leñero has displayed the search for all to see, in the form of a single confession, where elements of ambiguity and paradox enter only inasmuch as the narrator is presumed to be insane, and therefore incapable of flawless adherence to reality. In this, the first of Leñero's novels, the textual structure remains relatively in the background, although the monologue admirably suits the literary gambit of the search. In the following novels, the religious search is driven 'underground,' not to emerge openly in a novel until *Redil de ovejas* (1972),¹⁰ although it did resurface earlier in the dramatic work *Pueblo rechazado* (1969). From *Los albañiles* on, Leñero enters into the mainstream of the *nueva narrativa*, and allows the textual structures themselves to reinforce the search, sometimes even to express the very search, all the while letting the religious quest emerge gradually onto the surface of the narration.

Los albañiles (1964)¹¹ was Leñero's first major novel, winning the important Biblioteca Breve prize. In terms of superficial plot, there is indeed a search for identity; it is not for religious identity but rather for something much more mundane: the murder of an old night watchman at a Mexico City construction site. The detective in charge of the investigation mentally goes over a number of hypothetical scenarios, since nearly all the personages connected in any way with the dead man are implicated to one extent or another. Ultimately, no answer is found and the novel ends with the same note of frustration and directionlessness that has characterized the entire narration. Structurally, the most innovative feature is the method in which the hypothetical murder scenes are worked into the text with no warning; only afterward as the detective muses to himself does it become apparent that the events have occurred in his active imagination. In both plot line and structure, *Los albañiles* bears a striking similarity to Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommages* and to other French novels written just before Leñero's work, although Leñero does not make use of the Oedipus myth of the latter novel, but rather exploits other intellectual dilemmas.

One does not have to go far to discover the deeper search: the dead man, for example, is named Don Jesús. In contrast to his namesake, the old man was a total degenerate, addicted to alcohol, marijuana, sodomy, and other vices only hinted at. Although just before his death he appeared to be

harmless enough, due to his age and infirmities, he had had more than his share of depraved pastimes during his lifetime, and nearly all those associated with him had some reason to desire his death, or at least not to mourn him after it had occurred. One of Jesús's favorite pastimes was baiting the fanatically religious contract plumber Sergio García, a man whose reclusive life style and refusal to join in the general carousing of the other construction workers makes him the butt of ridicule--they call him 'El Cura.' García is horrified by cursing and swearing, and Don Jesús delighted in offending the ears of the man who had once tried to become a priest but for reasons both physical and psychological had been forced to leave the seminary. So abnormal is García's aversion to the words themselves that later, during the interviews, the police detective will similarly torment the man into explicitly acknowledging and using them (although it is possible that these events also occurred only in the detective's imagination).

Throughout the novel García's ambivalent feelings toward his own life appear in counterpoint with the depraved hedonism of the old man and of the other workers. García is obviously not happy where he is, but he takes no steps to escape from the situation other than the frustrating study of English at night school, futile since it will probably not lead to a better situation. The other workers sense his feelings and resent his airs of superiority. They torment him endlessly, and Sergio's life becomes a *via crucis*, to which is added the insult of the old Jesús' seducing García's younger (and not quite so innocent) sister, as well as her boyfriend Isidro, the peon who eventually discovers the old man's dead body. García is in the middle of the worst of all possible worlds, captive of his mind, which harbors feelings not shared by his fellows, his body, which is not powerful enough for him to defy his taunters, and his tribulations at the hands of the man whose very name he should hold in reverence. There is no direct evidence that García killed the old man, but it is certain that he sincerely wished Don Jesús' death, a fact which he found impossible to reconcile with his professions of Catholicism. While he denies having 'accesos de cólera,' as the detective accuses him, he does become violently angry when his attempts at attaining a spiritual life are mocked, particularly by the old watchman. It is not difficult to see in the predicament of Sergio García that of Leñero himself, albeit greatly modified and abstracted. Unlike García, Leñero does not espouse empty dogmatism and the novel is a poignant vision of the avowed Catholic in the midst of a society which, while Hispanic and thus presumably Christian, has nonetheless presented the Church with a schizophrenic reception over the years, a theme explicitly dealt with later in *Redil de ovejas*. The search for the killer of Jesús (who once again becomes transmuted into an object of importance) becomes a search to overcome the forces which have expelled the possibility of a religious identity from the lives of so many people, and the struggle to reconcile a charge of murder with the death of so obviously an undesirable character parallels the paradox of the modern Church, as political entity versus object of worship.

The superficial thematic and onomastic details of *Los albañiles* in themselves suffice to demonstrate the search for religious identity. Leñero has not stopped here, however, for a number of narrative manipulations have been employed to construct a text whose semiotic structure reinforces the recurring thematic projection, that of an ever on-going and frustrated search for self-identity. The frustration surrounding the police investigation reflects this search on a deeper level, as the inherently equivalent murder scenes mentally replayed by the inept detective all lead to nowhere. The intellectual predicament of the detective is identical to that of the philosopher in search of religious revelation, for no matter how many approaches to the ultimate truth are proposed, there are no absolute points of reference that would allow for an unequivocal choice. In *Los albañiles* the purpose of the narrative is not to expose the murderer, but to expose the futility of the search, and of all similar searches for absolute knowledge in the midst of epistemological chaos and competing possibilities, given the essential equivalence of all alternatives. Leñero's novel is based on inherent indeterminacy and ambiguity: the knowledge is not given to the reader because it does not exist. Not only must the reader play an active structure-creating role in the modern act of reading, a role common to the majority of contemporary literary narratives, but he must not exempt himself from the epistemological dilemmas revealed by the author. In *Los albañiles*, the actual identity of the murderer is unimportant. Indeed, given that every character in the novel had more than sufficient motive for killing Don Jesús, the available evidence points to a collective crime, or at least to collective guilt.¹² Abstracting away from this situation, the epistemological moral of the narrative structure is that *all* proposed solutions for the identity search may also be valid, or in other words, a composite of the common elements must be regarded as the ultimate goal of the search.

In terms of narrative structures, *Estudio Q* (1965)¹³ is by far the most unusual of Leñero's novels; it stands alone among contemporary Latin American novels as having carried the technique of infinite regress to its logical extreme.¹⁴ Like all of Leñero's novels, *Estudio Q* begins innocently enough, promising a banal plot drawn from everyday Mexican life. Anticipating the novel-within-a-novel later to be used in *El garabato*, Leñero makes use of the filming of a television soap opera, being carried out in *Studio Q*. Even more curiously, the plot of the supposed drama revolves around the life of the protagonist, the stubborn and capricious actor Alex Jiménez, and is supposed to be autobiographical, as the actor plays himself in order to give the *teleaudiencia* an insight into the life of a soap opera star. Little time elapses before the plot begins to thicken structurally, as Gladys Monroy, the script writer, and the nameless but dictatorial set director enter into the narrative. Gladys Monroy is engaged in writing the details for future events and the director supplies a meta-level of criticism, enjoining the writer to modify or replace episodes and battling with the strong-willed actor. It becomes apparent that the boundaries between reality, script and

events occurring in the studio are tenuous and transparent, and become progressively harder to distinguish. The first indication comes at the end of the first chapter (pp. 65-66), where there appears a scene involving Alex at a party, drunkenly shooting a revolver. As in *Los albañiles* and unlike the previous scenes, this scene is presented with no indication of its relation to the television studio, thus leaving open the possibility that it is not part of the drama. Alex, the real character, is constantly confused with Alex the personage of the script as written, rewritten and commented upon by the other characters in Leñero's novel. Early along, as Gladys Monroy discusses with the director Alex's anger at a particular scene, the director replies: «¿Ve cómo tenía razón? Necesitábamos definirlo bien para que nos diera esa clase de reacciones.» (p. 84) Alex constantly attempts to impose his own versions of scenes, but nearly always is forced to capitulate to the duo script writer-director.

It appears that the writer and director possess the ability to force events to happen to the real (on the next higher meta-level, that is) Alex, by writing them into the script. Another sign that levels are being mixed occurs with the introduction, into the text of the television drama, of Toño, the stage assistant of the studio director, who up until this point has appeared only on the meta-level during discussions of the script. Elsewhere, after two competing versions of a scene are presented in parallel columns, the columns suddenly converge with the apparent triumph of Alex's version: «'No' respondo, digo, grito; salgo del estudio empujando la puerta y . . .» However, this apparently straightforward interpretation is ruptured by the last sentence of the paragraph: «debería pensar, debería decir, debería actuar así Alex» (pp. 127-28). In another scene, Alex meets Actorfracasado, a former colleague who keeps pressing his now successful friend for assistance in his own rundown career. Marta, an actress on the set, mentions that the latest version of the script (which Alex has not seen yet) calls for Alex to meet an old acquaintance, an actor who has fallen from glory and who has now come to hover about the flame of Alex's brilliant career. Actorfracasado immediately identifies with the suggestion, begging to be given the part as he comments «ironías del destino.»

On yet another occasion, the director receives a call from Actorfracasado, informing him that Alex and Marta are out dancing, behaving in an amorous fashion paralleling the upcoming scenes in the script and apparently in contradiction to their real-life relationship. Alex and the other characters are trapped. What is more, the confusion is made complete, for the characters themselves are aware of their inability to escape from the web of fate which is being woven around them. Alex seems to be falling in love with Marta, only to find out that according to the latest chapter of the script, this is what he was 'supposed' to be doing: «la aventura parece comenzar y terminar allí, pero sucede que cuando Alex se pone a ensayar los capítulos de la obra descubre que el personaje femenino no es otro que la misma mujer con la que ha pernoctado. Esto lo confunde. Por un momento

creyó haber encontrado el amor de su vida y ahora se da cuenta que la mujer pertenece a la ficción. Se atormenta . . . y cuando parece que va a hundirse en el pozo de la angustia toma conciencia de su situación. ¡Decide afrontar su destino!» (p. 181) Alex is trapped in a series of boxes inside boxes, mirror reflections inside mirror reflections, unable to sort out the entangling threads of reality and fiction being cast around him by the director, the script writer, and the text of the novel itself. For the most singular aspect of the above passage is that, while apparently shedding light on the development of the text at this point, it is itself presumably the reading of yet another plot synopsis; this explanation is but another work of fiction, not of the author Vicente Leñero, but of another Gladys Monroy, another director, another Alex. And, at one of the intervening levels of discourse, the director, aware of these developments, speaks to Gladys Monroy and informs her that they must hurry and incorporate the new details which are developing outside the studio, to further entrap Alex «para impedir que Alex se saliera con la suya» (p. 183).

From this point the text dashes madly down the dizzying pathway toward total confusion of levels. Alex, on one level, appears once again to be really falling in love with Marta as a person, but to refute his previously mentioned infatuation he declares to her that «Fue su voluntad la que me obligó a fingir que yo, ansiosos de salirme con la mía, te invitaba a mi departamento esta noche para acostarme con la protagonista en lugar de con el personaje; la que me dictó reacciones de angustia y de desconcierto; . . . y así es como estoy aquí, obedeciendo su mandato . . . y todavía hay más: de aquí yo debo ir a casa del director escénico para tener con él una violenta discusión . . .» (p. 222), and Alex proceeds to reveal other future details, which in fact do later occur. At another point, the insertion of stage directions reveals that this conversation, which had seemed to be part of Alex's external 'reality,' is nothing but a part of the drama to be televised. On another occasion, a graphological device indicates that an apparently innocuous conversation is part of the script: in the midst of the page the format suddenly shifts to two columns, with the dialogue on one side and stage directions on the other. The director himself becomes part of the cast at this point, and sustains a discussion with Alex in which the latter describes the entire situation as 'absurdo,' clearly an understatement. It is completely impossible to determine causal relations in the text, for Leñero has placed a full grasp of the narrative beyond the grasp of the human cognitive apparatus: in order to stop the infinite regress of the texts-within texts-within . . . , it is necessary to grasp infinity itself, by definition a super-human task.

The bizarre structural manipulations of *Estudio Q*, although coming at a time when a number of Latin American novelists were experimenting with outrageously complex narrative devices, clearly serve a purpose beyond giving Leñero a passkey into the club of new writers. It is no accident that the thematic elements portrayed by the tortuously spiraling structure deal with the search for a destiny and the inability to reconcile a desire for voluntary

control over that destiny with the feeling of submission to a superior force. As in *Los albañiles*, the superior force in *Estudio Q* is not yet named; it is not God, nor even destiny, but is rather conveyed to the reader via the narrative structure, and the epistemological impasses it entails. The reader of *Estudio Q* cannot help but become entangled in the infinite meta-levels which entrap the characters and their author (Vicente Leñero on the plane of the readers but merely one of infinitely many authors and readers following the extrapolation demanded by the narrative format). The inability to extract a firm epistemological basis from the text parallels, and may be taken as a transformation of, the search which in Leñero's novels is an essential part of the human condition. The infinite regress portrays this quest more explicitly than the epistemological impasse of *Los albañiles*, where the simultaneous examination of several equally probable solutions led to the conclusion that there is no solution, or that all solutions are equivalent. In *Estudio Q* the search is addressed directly, and a tantalizing glimpse is provided at the input end of an infinite tunnel at whose other extreme, were such to exist, the search might come to an end.

El garabato (1967)¹⁵ uses the format of the novel-within-novel to place the reader (and author) at a greater distance from the text. The principal text deals with the Mexican novelist Fernando Moreno, a recluse (quite like Juan Rulfo, whom Leñero considers as his mentor) who is currently suffering from a nearly total inability to write, all the while contemplating writing the definitive Mexican novel. Moreno reads in bits and pieces an unsolicited manuscript which has been given him by one Fabián Mendizábal, a mysterious young man who appeared out of nowhere to solicit an interview, which was subsequently published in *Excelsior*. Mendizábal's novel appears to be a trite thriller, and although Moreno never finishes reading he does not admit this fact when he returns the manuscript, amidst the young man's protestations that the entire meaning has been lost on Moreno. The writer, however, has other things on his mind, for in addition to the chronic writer's block he is tormented by the lack of compatibility between his life with a mistress and his professed Catholicism. The text contains numerous examples of soul searches, which always come out with Moreno as the loser. Moreno is divorced and while he apparently does not regret being apart from his ex-wife, he does wish to gain the affection of his son, who prefers to remain loyal to his mother. Moreno's friends, prototypes of more carefree men of the world, try to persuade him that all the mental flagellation will lead nowhere, and that what he is doing is normal and even, in his social environment, acceptable. Unable to reconcile himself to the religious prohibitions against his life style, Moreno finally decides to abandon his mistress, a course of action contemplated many times in the past, but this time carried out. The novel ends with Moreno boarding a plane for Los Angeles. That the escape is only of physical location is revealed by the novel's final line: «El jet despergó de la pista y yo sentí, al ascender en vuelo, que el aparato me raptaba para siempre inventando, anticipándome

una muerte ante la cual yo podía escribir con su sentido absoluto (puesto que es muy probable que Cristo no sea Dios) la palabra fin.» For the first time since *La voz adolorida*, the problem has been named, brought out into the open and directly confronted. From this point on, the succeeding novels will address the search for religious identity without the need for such a dense allegorical wrapping.

As in the earlier novels, Leñero has created a textual structure which parallels the activities of the protagonists. Moreno's life is strangely similar to that of Rodolfo, the protagonist of Mendizábal's manuscript. The young antihero is having an affair with a *gringa loca*, which leads to a discovery of a murder and a kidnapping by a gang of sinister characters who carry the young man, his plight unresolved, from the pages of Leñero's novel. Rodolfo is also searching for an identity, trying to compete with his rich playboy companion and with the fastliving American woman. Although he has no overt religious preoccupations, at one point in his flight from the criminals he takes refuge in a church, where the priest finally convinces him that he must leave. The adolescent does not fully trust the cleric, suspecting him of collaboration with his pursuers, and the entire episode of sanctuary leaves a feeling of great uneasiness. The essential parallels between Moreno's life and that of the protagonist of the unfinished novel merely confirm Leñero's affirmation of the inherent interchangeability and inexorability of human destiny. Moreno, Mendizábal, Rodolfo, and countless others are caught up in the same situation, unable to control their destiny and awash in a sea of contradictory philosophies and offers of salvation.

In yet another way the textual structure of *El garabato* reaffirms the character of the unreachable goal, in the manner in which the fragments of the embedded narrative are presented. Moreno reads the novel a little at a time, interjecting comments and finally abandoning the reading altogether. His own life is a similar series of false starts and incompleted actions. Moreover, it is apparent in reading the novel that Leñero never intended to resolve the plot of the embedded novel; like the murder in *Los albañiles* and the endless embedding of *Estudio Q*, it is merely another manifestation of the impossibility of acquiring information. There can be no end to the story, or at least no unique end, and every reader can supply a conclusion for himself, if he feels the need, for in the end all outcomes are equally probable or, as in the final words of the novel, equally doubtful. Moreno can find no answer to his attempts at religious enlightenment; he views his situation with the ambivalence typical of Leñero's works. One part of him realizes that his scruples are just empty posturing, and another part of him is firmly aware that his very salvation is at stake. He is equally sure that no answer can be found, but just as Leñero keeps on writing in the face of this obvious fact, so Moreno keeps plugging forward, on a trajectory that may be ultimately more self-destructive than the path that Leñero has chosen in his life as a professional writer.

Unlike the preceding novels, *Redil de ovejas* (1972)¹⁶ is manifestly con-

cerned with religious identity, and the theme permeates every page. The novel concerns the intertwined lives of several characters, each of which is intimately involved with Catholicism in Mexico, at the present time and during earlier decades of this century, particularly during the 'Cristero' movement of the 1920's. There is the frustrated aging priest, bored by his life of eternally confessing *beatitas* but unable to escape to a more meaningful life. There is the old Rosita whose religious fervor has turned into senile fanaticism, tinged with thievery, mysticism and witchcraft. There is also the priest as a young seminarian, and again later in life, trying to deal with his wayward sister (who in the end turns out to be none other than old Rosita, who has found religion in this strange form after a life of frustrations). There is the young Catholic action worker, ridiculed by his friends but like Sergio García of *Los albañiles* determined to bear his cross. An older version of this same personage (perhaps the same man) also appears. There is the young *novia*, deeply religious, whose fiancé thinks only of carnal pleasure, much to her dismay. These and other characters flit in and out of the narration in a complex structure which has by now become Leñero's trademark.

Once again Leñero uses an innovative narrative device to underline the point he wishes to make, another variant on the technique of destruction of knowledge through infinite choice. This time it is the identity of names. All of the major male characters are named Bernardo: the priest (or priests), the seminarian, the religious young man and his older counterpart, the non-spiritual suitor, the young boy who finds religion at the hands of the old Rosita, whom he originally takes for a witch, and so forth. Not only are the names the same but it is clear that the personages are intended to represent a sole narrative unit, in various metamorphoses. Certain of these plots are logically compatible with the presented material. For example Bernardo is first seen as a young boy turning from a life of vandalism in the streets to helping the old woman, who in time convinces him of a religious vocation. Later, the same person is seen in the seminary and still later talking with his sister on several occasions. However, it is logically impossible to reconcile this character with the priest at the other end of the time scale, who is confessing the same old lady, nor with the other indications that Padre Bernardo was a married man, who became a priest late in life after having been widowed. Moreover, it is possible that this born-again priest was the formerly spiritual Bernardo and the worldly Bernardo, and the reader knows full well that he was both of these characters simultaneously.

In similar fashion, all of the female characters are eventually known as Rosamaria. Bernardo's sister is known only as La Güera, both as a child and as an adult, and it is not until the last page of the novel that the reader learns that the old Rosita is the Güera of earlier times. That this demented old lady cannot be the sister of Padre Bernardo is as obvious as the fact that she is indeed his sister, as well as being the old lady who launched him on his religious career, and perhaps his former wife, fiancée ad companion for

good measure. Rosamaria and Bernardo confront one another at all points on the time scale. It is impossible to clearly delimit the boundaries between them despite the fact that many of the events occur at specified points in time. At one point, when Rosita first is introduced to the young Bernardo, she smiles and says «¿De veras te llamas Bernardo? Yo he conocido a muchos niños y jóvenes y hombres que se llamaban así: Bernardo» (p. 97), and she laughs aloud, ironically underscoring the structural paradox. The impossibility of separating the similarly named characters results from the fact that insufficient information is given each time a scene is portrayed, as well as from certain explicit contradictions. This lack of information is part of Leñero's deliberate withholding of knowledge that would turn the narrative interweaving into a trivially straight-forward plot. This is equated with the impossibility of religious knowledge, for at every point in the novel Bernardo is constantly searching, dissatisfied, unable to come to grips with the questions that plague him. Whether it be the boy, the novice priest, the married man or the old confessor, Bernardo is never at peace with himself, and he is never fully able to communicate a coherent religious message to others, including his sister, his wife, his fiancée, or the old woman. Through the narrative impossibility of separating the logically incompatible references, Leñero is condemning the lack of knowledge and decision to a permanent status, underlining the fact that since all points are equivalent, it is useless to strike out in any given direction.

The novels just discussed demonstrate vividly Leñero's evolution as a writer, via the progressive convergence of structural manipulation and literary theme, in order to present the religious, spiritual and personal quest in the form of a novel. From the obscure and camouflaged structures of *Los albañiles* and *Estudio Q* to the transparent searching of *Redil de ovejas* the reader is prodded through a variety of narrative innovations that form an essential part of the literary message. Having brought the search once again into the open, Leñero did not stop, for after a hiatus to write the political chronicle *Viaje a Cuba* (1974) and the autobiographical account *Los periodistas* (1978), Leñero returned to the theme with *El evangelio de Lucas Gavilán* (1979).¹⁷ This most singular novel is nothing less than a version of the life of Christ set in modern Mexico, a Mexican Jesus Christ Superstar in which the prose of the narrator and the voices of the characters ripple with regional colloquial Spanish and the impact of a religious revolutionary in post-revolutionary Mexico are probed. Following the format of *El garabato*, the novel purports to be the work of one Lucas Gavilán, who is Leñero himself but thinly disguised, and a brief prologue states the intent of the novel as a modern edition of the Gospel of Luke: «El intento resulta disparatado en su origen porque es imposible hallar equivalencias lógicas de la época de Jesucristo a la concreta y muy compleja realidad nacional de los días que vivimos. Sólo un alarde de cinismo literario podía forzar los hechos a tales extremos, pero no encontré una manera mejor de reescribir el evangelio de Lucas con estricta fidelidad a su estructura y a su espíritu.»

The key structures of the novel, thus defined, the text proceeds in a fashion homologous to the Biblical version: each subchapter is headed by the corresponding verse from the Bible and the narrated events transfer the original setting to a modern configuration in Mexico.

The protagonist, of course, carries the name of the Savior: not, as in *Los albañiles*, merely Jesús (an acceptable Spanish name) but Jesucristo. His last name stands in striking contrast, being the plebian Gómez. Jesucristo Gómez is the illegitimate son of the provincial girl María David (and not the son of her intended husband José Gómez) and to the objections of her *comadres* that «así no se llama nadie. . . solamente Dios, el que murió en la cruz,» María David replies «Jesucristo vino a defender a los pobres y a luchar contra las injusticias. ¹² Maldijo a los ricos. Combatió a los explotadores. Dio su vida para cambiar este mundo. Por eso quiero que mi hijo se llame Jesucristo.» María David has put her finger on the ills plaguing modern Mexico, revealing that in the two thousand years since the time of Christ little has changed in the lot of the poor.

From this point on the text moves directly into a modern version of the life of Christ, complete in every detail and spiced up with the humorous and nostalgic Mexican language which Leñero employs in all levels of the narration. The trip to Bethlehem becomes a trip to Mexico City to recover the family homestead, lost to the right of eminent domain in a freeway construction project. John the Baptist comes alive in the *persona* of Juan Bautista, a radical peasant labor agitator who appeals to the nascent revolutionary feelings of Jesucristo Gómez. The latter, after nearly succeeding in leading to triumph a national revolution, dies at the hands of the established oligarchy. His resurrection, no more miraculous than the other 'miracles' which are attributed to him, is accompanied by a severe earthquake in Mexico City, a likely spot for such a natural disaster, and the text ends, 'not with a bang but with a whimper,' in a casual discussion among the 'disciples,' chatting about the death of Jesucristo Gómez. Despite the disclaimer of the prologue, Leñero has managed a poignant and powerful transplantation of the Gospel to the modern world, in particular to his native Mexico.

El evangelio de Lucas Gavilán is unique among Leñero's novels to date in that it contains none of the structural manipulation and experimentation that highlight his previous narratives (including the factual chronicle *Los periodistas*). Each chapter contains a straightforward narration in which the life of Jesucristo Gómez is related in strict correspondence with the verses extracted from the original gospel. The Leñero reader who is expecting at every turn of the page a plunge into a linguistic labyrinth discovers a smoothly reading text with no obstacles in the way of a rapid and enjoyable first reading. The only linguistic innovation is in the choice of colloquial Mexican Spanish for the narration as well as the dialogues, but Leñero has already made use of colloquial styles in earlier novels, particularly *Los albañiles* and *Los periodistas*. Leñero has not abandoned his fondness for

structural deviations and paradoxes; he has merely shifted the manipulations to a higher semiotic level: that of the epistemological basis of the text, as a putative historico-social commentary.

Leñero had already begun the task of literary structure as epistemological paradox in *Redil de ovejas*. In the latter novel, the impossibility of separating the various characters named Bernardo and Rosamaría is compounded by the presence of unequivocal textual clues that point to the incompatibility of the various readings: the same character cannot be in two places at the same time, nor in the same place at two different periods of history, if he is the same character. The meandering narrative structure of *Redil de ovejas* is thus supplemented by yet another incursion into the realm of structural paradox, as the reader is brought face to face with an insurmountable paradox, more explicit and categorical than the infinite regress of *Estudio Q*. In *El evangelio de Lucas Gavilán* this same type of paradox is promoted to the central structural principle determining the narrative.

In *El evangelio de Lucas Gavilán*, the paradox resides in the fact that the life of Jesus is being related at two different points in history, presumably as two separate events, and yet, strangely enough, the characters in the second 'incarnation' live in the Christian era in Mexico, and are aware of the life of the original Jesus Christ. That the modern Mexicans in Leñero's novel are not living in some science-fiction world where Christ has not yet come is made clear right from the outset, where the naming of Jesucristo Gómez is called into question. Nor is the similarity, not only in name but also in life, between Jesucristo Gómez and Jesus Christ himself totally unnoticed by the characters in the novel. At the baptism of the baby Jesucristo, the blind Simeón Terrones cries «¡Regresó Jesucristo al mundo! ¡Regresó para salvarnos» (pp. 37-38) and he tells María David «muchos no creerán en tu hijo y tú vas a sufrir.» Jesucristo's parents even wonder whether he will perhaps be called to the ministry, in view of his strange behavior and constant questioning. Later in the novel, as Jesucristo is becoming known as a charismatic figure, a group of university sociology students write a research report on the emerging popular figure: «Se enfrentaron también a muchos datos confusos: supuestas curaciones milagrosas que ya formaban parte de una leyenda y cuya clave podía localizarse en el nombre de pila del sujeto, tal vez un sobre nombre tramposo para imponerse a los incautos» (p. 93); Examining his speeches, the same study indicates that «no aportaban teorías novedosas desde el punto de vista ideológico . . . repetían más bien conceptos manidos por el cristianismo y las corrientes pacifistas . . .» (p. 94)

All the way through the novel the other characters represent contemporary Mexico as it is, a Christian country in which the facts of the historical Jesus are never far from the surface in day to day activities. At one point, Pedro Simón, one of the 'disciples,' says «Tú no te llamas en balde como te llamas porque eres el mismísimo Jesucristo. Ese que vino a

salvarnos hace un chorro de siglos,» to which Jesucristo Gómez responds «no le digan eso a nadie» (p. 132), significantly enough, without denying the statement. This is the only time the comparison is explicitly made in this fashion, and represents the structural nucleus of the paradox, although when Jesucristo is being tortured to death by the police thugs, one of them asks «¿Te sentías Jesucristo o qué?» (p. 281), and when being informed that «Jesucristo es mi nombre,» the agent continues «Y te tomaste muy en serio el nombrecito, ¿verdad?» (p. 283) When the tortured Jesucristo finally dies in the back of the police wagon, and the earthquake begins, one of the other prisoners in the truck declares «parece como si este tipo fuera no sé qué» (p. 293). The life of Jesucristo Gómez bears more than coincidental similarity to the life of Jesus of Nazareth, since the entire narrative is based on a faithful rendering of an original gospel. We are not seeing a modern parallel, reinacted, two thousand years after the fact, but in essence the *first* coming of Jesus, exactly as described in the Gospel of Luke, with only chronological, geographical and linguistic details being modified. On the other hand, Jesucristo Gómez speaks frequently of the gospels, particularly when being tortured by the police, where he states «Ayudábamos a la gente inspirados en el Evangelio, es todo» (p. 281). Jesucristo uses the word *cris-tiano* frequently in discussions with his disciples, but only as a quasi-generic term, referring to the original teachings of Jesus Christ as opposed to the modern transmutation which is the Catholic Church. He also enters into theological discussions with students and religious figures, but speaks only of the interpretation of the gospels and not of Jesus Christ himself, except on one brief occasion (p. 251), where he is quoting a biblical parable literally. At other points Jesucristo Gómez speaks in parables drawn from the Bible but neither he nor anyone around him makes the obvious connection, adding to the timeless nature of the narrated events.

Other characters at times give evidence of awareness of the Biblical events. Jesucristo and his disciples pray to the Virgen de Guadalupe, and attend many masses. The government official responsible for turning Jesucristo over to the police says «Yo me lavo las manos como Pilatos» (p. 287). However, except for the one tantalizing remark of Pedro Simeón no one, including Jesucristo himself, accepts the immediate identification with the historical Jesus, and even the explicit comparisons noted above are made in a narrative vacuum, since they are never acknowledged by Jesucristo, but rather serve as a sort of author's (or meta-author's) metacommentary.

This, then, represents the epistemological paradox of the text. Jesus of Nazareth, naturally enough, had no awareness of an earlier savior, since he was the first individual to live out the events attributed to him. If the life of Jesucristo Gómez is to be an authentic reproduction of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, he too must be starting with a *tabula rasa*, forging his destiny as a leader of men, a misunderstood savior fighting oppression and tyranny, and must not be basing his life, consciously or unconsciously, on the life of

a historical namesake. During the course of *El evangelio de Lucas Gavilán*, there is no attempt to hide the existence or awareness of Jesus of Nazareth, who therefore forms the spiritual and historical backdrop for the text. On the other hand, the characters of the novel never realize the true extent of the parallelism between their activities and those described in the gospels, with which they are all presumably familiar to a certain extent. Juan Bautista, seeking to expand and legitimize his revolutionary movement, states that «yo no sirvo para encabezar un alzamiento, ni me digan. Se necesita un tipo con más güevos» (p. 52). This person will be Jesucristo Gómez, although neither he nor Juan Bautista realizes it yet. Juan Bautista speaks of «un amor de Dios» while Jesucristo Gómez himself, as he begins his mission in earnest, quotes scripture, when tempted by fellow bricklayer el Diablo Samperio: «No sólo de pan vive el hombre, ya lo dice el Evangelio» (p. 58). Samperio responds: «Primero ayúdate a ti mismo, haz tus centavos, y ya luego regresas a dártelas de redentor. Lo que necesitan los jodidos es lana, no palabras, eso no llena el estómago.» Jesucristo Gómez speaks of the need to change things in the Church, of the excessive power, political and secular, enjoyed by members of the clergy, and of the need to leave his own land, in order that his words might be believed. At all points he in enacting the life of Jesus of Nazareth, and yet, while the name of God is often invoked, and reference is even made to the Gospels, the name of Jesus Christ is rarely mentioned in connection with Jesucristo Gómez except in the few cases noted above, and the protagonist himself apparently never draws the parallels that are all too obvious to the reader. Just as Jesus of Nazareth did not rise to the status of savior until after his death, so does Jesucristo Gómez never acknowledge his true universal role, which transcends that of the leader of a relatively localized populist movement.

In *El evangelio de Lucas Gavilán* history has in a sense bifurcated, in order to present the existence of Jesucristo Gómez and his activities, and then come together again, to allow the reader to draw the parallels between the lives of the two men named Jesus. As in *Redil de ovejas*, the paradox seems painfully obvious to the reader: it is clear that Jesucristo Gómez must depend on the life of Jesus of Nazareth for the interpretation of his own life's activities, and yet it is equally obvious that in the text of the novel, the life of Jesus is being worked out for the first time, for the only time, independently of chronological antecedents. In terms of the epistemological structure of the text itself, the paradox has no resolution; it must simply be accepted as read. It does, however, allow for interpretation in the real world. Mexico, as much of the rest of the world, is officially and spiritually a Christian country, and yet in the opinion of many, the original message of Christianity has been lost. Jesucristo Gómez can relive the life of Jesus of Nazareth because nobody really remembers the true message of the latter, and hence, the text would have us believe, nobody can recognize the parallels when they present themselves. Those ignorant of history are truly doomed to repeat it, and even those who claim a passive awareness of cer-

tain historical details may yet fail to enact the necessary changes and thus escape from the historical circularity of destiny.

El evangelio de Lucas Gavilán, in addition to being a spiritual critique of modern society, is also the most recent step in Leñero's ever-ongoing search for spiritual identity. Jesus of Nazareth sought to establish a new order; Jesucristo Gómez, following in the next historical cycle, did the same. The inability to unravel the epistemological paradox in *El evangelio de Lucas Gavilán* parallels once again the paradox of linear versus circular destiny, the ever-frustrated search for identity and self-realization.

El evangelio de Lucas Gavilán is also the most recent phase of Leñero's narrative evolution. Despite the fact that the novel is based on the life of the individual whose existence forms the basis for the Christian faith, there is no guarantee that this novel is the end of Leñero's search: only time will answer that question. Given the fact that even at the end of *El evangelio de Lucas Gavilán* the search has not been concluded, the identity has not been established and no reconciliation has occurred, it is possible that Leñero will strike out in new directions, to continue working on this philosophical dilemma.

At the end of *El evangelio de Lucas Gavilán*, a group of workmen stand discussing the death of this presumed redeemer, whose life and death must be repeated infinitely many times, it seems, without changing the universe. *Redil de ovejas* also finishes on the same note as it began: at first the description of the decrepit old woman about to pester the priest with her endlessly trivial confessions, and at least a post-mortem revelation of her identity. Even this revelation is not a bit of truly usable information, but merely another tangled thread in the endlessly intertwined destinies of the novel. *Estudio Q* ends in the middle of a word, as though a television set had been abruptly unplugged. The metalevels are no more distinguishable at the end of the text than they were at the beginning, and the reader is forced to face the ontological implications of this infinite open-ended structure. The end of *El garabato* finds Moreno escaping futilely with the words of scepticism. The abandoned manuscript mocks him by its absence: now that he has returned it and has discovered that for all intents and purposes its author has no recoverable identity, its conclusion is lost to him. He has let slip away from him the one thread that might possibly have led to a reasonable conclusion (the protagonist of the embedded novel also abandons an obvious clue, the reference to *Orlando*),¹⁹ although given the overall tone of futility it probably would have led nowhere. *Los albañiles* ends on the note most clearly indicative of the useless nature of the search. The detective, after a night of carousing with his colleagues, walks to the construction site where the old man had been murdered and awakens the (new) watchman. There is no indication that this man is any other than the first: all that is shown is a man covered with a sarape warming a pot of coffee. In another scene reminiscent of *Les Gommés*, where the detective, in trying to recreate a pseudo-crime ends up by committing a real one, the

sleuth in *Los albañiles* looks head-on at the circular situation which entraps him.

Despite the endless searching underlying his works, Leñero's novels are not terribly pessimistic, but neither are they optimistic. They are realistic, for they portray an acceptance of the final nature of the unresolved battle to obtain information. Individuals have sought religious truth in a number of ways: by attaching themselves to a spiritual leader, by reading supposedly revealed writings, by participating in mass activities designed to draw the power of the divinity down into their midst, or by privately trying to capture an inspiration. Judging by the testimonies that have come down to us, each message is different, enough so to make one suspicious of the existence of an exclusive revelation in the midst of all the others. At the same time, the common elements seem significant enough to indicate that, regardless of the path taken, one may arrive in the end at the same point. Whether this point may be true spiritual revelations is another question, one which few dare to broach. Leñero approaches this question in his novels, by accepting from the beginning the impossibility of obtaining a single answer.

The preceding remarks have traced a narrative evolution through a series of remarkable novels. The religious search, at first disguised, hidden behind symbolic names, suggestive allegories, structured ambiguities, becomes ever more transparent, converging in the openly declared religious turmoil of *Redil de ovejas* and the ultimate replaying of the Christian condition in *El evangelio de Lucas Gavilán*. The life of Jesus of Nazareth provides parallels for such an evolution: his early days gave no public knowledge of his future, and all had to be interpreted via symbols and earlier prophecies; his progression through tortuous paths and temptations, his public declarations, and his posthumous legacy, are all significant. The parallel between the Biblical events and the narrative evolution in Leñero's novels is sufficiently striking as to suggest more than a coincidental progression, although not necessarily a conscious effort.

Leñero has complemented his narrative efforts with a constantly evolving structural formula, in which the semiotic structures that create ambiguity, infinite regress and paradox are used to symbolize and to reinforce the inexorable nature of destiny and the never-ending search for a resolution of the human paradox. These textual innovations are not gratuitous; to the contrary, they are essential to the understanding of Leñero's entire literary production, which, to a greater extent than with nearly any other contemporary writer, justifies the designation of *intertext*. His novels are not meant to be read in isolation, but rather as components in one massive act of self-expression via the literary mode, and it is only by considering the novels as stopping points in an ordered progression that the full process of signification may be grasped. Each of the texts studied contains a superficial theme under which may be found a single-minded preoccupation with the search for a religious identity. It appears to be this search, among other factors, which motivates the constant narrative experimentation and in-

novation, the presentation of a simple plot in a technically complicated fashion that destroys the possibility for uniquely extracting information. It is not Leñero's intention to present neatly tied packages of best-selling thrillers. His views are much more complex and require that one comprehend the lack of a single solution. The essential equivalence of paths, the frustration of the search, are coupled with the difficult human situation faced by a writer with religious feelings in the midst of the world's fastest-growing technoplex.

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Notes

¹ Perhaps the best study of Leñero's religious identity as portrayed in his novels is found in the study by M. Niño, «Religión y sociedad en la obra de Vicente Leñero,» (Ph. D. Dissertation, Michigan State University, 1977). Other remarks are found in the dissertation by L. Grossman, «Las novelas de Vicente Leñero,» (Rutgers University, 1972).

² In addition to mentioning this problem in many interviews, Leñero even brings the matter up for discussion in *Los periodistas*, in several places.

³ D. Torre Fierro, «Vicente Leñero: venturas y desventuras de un escritor,» *Revista de Bellas Artes*, (Marzo-Abril 1974), p. 17.

⁴ Previously he had published the volume of stories *La polvareda y otros cuentos* (1959).

⁵ *La voz adolorida* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1961).

⁶ *A fuerza de palabras* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de America Latina, 1967).

⁷ This influence is noted by Mario Benedetti, «México en el pantógrafo de Vicente Leñero» in *Letras del continente mestizo* (Montevideo: Arca, 1969), pp. 232-236 [p. 236]; R. Boldori, «Comentarios bibliográficos,» *Boletín de Literatura Hispánica*, 8 (1969), 105-108 [106].

⁸ Cf. R. Xirau, review of *La voz adolorida* in *La Palabra y el Hombre*, VI (1962), 311-313 [313].

⁹ Donoso was early aware of Leñero's writings, and there is every reason to suppose that he had read *La voz adolorida* and/or *A fuerza de palabras* before writing *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*. See J. Donoso, «Vicente Leñero, un enriquecimiento de la novela mexicana,» *Siempre*, 155 (1965), xii-xiv.

¹⁰ Although not published until 1972, *Redil de ovejas* was presumably begun in 1965 or even before, and was to be Leñero's 'gran novela.' He comments on this novel in an interview with Blanca Haro, «Vicente Leñero: mi soledad es mi libertad,» *Siempre* (Nov. 1965), p. xii; further mention is made in Leñero's short autobiography *Nuevos escritores mexicanos del siglo XX presentados por sí mismos: Vicente Leñero* (México: Empresas Editoriales, 1967), p. 35.

¹¹ *Los albañiles* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1964).

¹² See for example I. Ludmer, «Vicente Leñero, *Los albañiles*; lector y actor» in J. Lafforgue, ed. *Nueva novela latinoamericana*, v. 1 (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1969), pp. 194-208. See also O. Kellerman, «Los albañiles de Vicente Leñero: Estudio de la Víctima,» *Hispanófila*, 70 (1980), 45-55.

¹³ *Estudio Q* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1965).

¹⁴ See J. Lipski, «Vicente Leñero: infinite regress as (self-)parody» to appear in *Perspectives in 20th Century Literature* (in press).

¹⁵ *El garabato* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1967).

¹⁶ *Redil de ovejas* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1972).

¹⁷ *El evangelio de Lucas Gavilán* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1979).

¹⁸ The given name *Jesucristo* has been reported for blacks on the coast of Ecuador, by Humberto Toscano Mateus, *El español en el Ecuador* (Madrid: *Anejo LXI de la Revista de Filología Española*, 1953), p. 221.

¹⁹ The reference is supposedly to a copy of Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando*, which Rodolfo sees on a newsstand at the airport and wonders about in connection with the mysterious inscription 'Orlando 69' that accompanied the key he was supposed to turn over to the murdered man. Ironically enough, page 69 of the edition mentioned in Leñero's novel is completely blank, again highlighting the list of frustrated searches and blind alleys that has characterized Leñero's novels to date.