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THEME AND FORM IN THE FICTION
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OF GUILLERMO MENESES
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by

LIGIA SALAZAR

Thesis submitted for the degree of
Master of Letters
at the
University of Glasgow

Faculty of Arts. Department of Hispanic Studies
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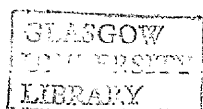
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A B S T R A C T

Guillermo Meneses (1911 - 79) belonged to the Grupo Elite formed in Caracas, Venezuela. Though he was involved in a range of different intellectual activities, literature was his central concern.

For Meneses the task of literature was to understand the world and express that understanding" a pursuit which defines and shapes the whole development of his fiction. His maturing technique, his choice of themes and his use of language are the instruments through which he simultaneously interprets and reflects reality.

The development of his work follows a line of investigation that begins with his early works of exploration. In Adolescencia a psychological theme is deployed: the state of mind of a young boy at a certain point in his puberty. In La balandra Isabel llegó esta tarde, however, the focus is displaced to a metaphysical and existential theme, the subordination of Man to the dictates of destiny. From another angle, the same problem is presented in Canción de negros, through the plight of the negro peasants.

Borrachera and Campeones present variants of the same theme: the failure of Man to achieve the fulfilment of his expectations. Borrachera presents Antonio, the poor negro drinking, sinking himself into madness in an attempt to escape his misery. And Campeones describes with bitter irony the failure of the youthful dreams of four friends.

The subsequent phase of Meneses' work turns towards a more individualistic focusing of reality through the examination of a series of personal. El duque, for example, presents the story of a man who hides from himself behind his nickname, while El mestizo José Vargas turns upon the absence of any defined identity in the protagonist Jose Vargas. Un destino cumplido discloses the revelation Julio Alvarado has had at the moment of his death that his destiny is failure.

Alias el rey describes the angry response of the character to his fate of misery. All these destinies have in common the idea that there is no basis for hope in human destiny, hence the necessity to escape. That alternative possibility is opened up by the character Jose Prados in the story Tardío regreso a través de un espejo, when art is suggested as a channel of escape.

La mano junto al muro and El falso cuaderno de Narciso Espejo are a practical attempts to escape such a doomed destiny by producing an alternative reality in which the ruling factor is the artist's will. However, they also prove to be failures, since theirs is an artificial game. Nevertheless, at the end, these exercises of falsehood provide Meneses with a sense of selfknowledge which forbids any use of deceitful tricks, and instead, leads him to admit what is suggested in the story El destino es un dios olvidado, and even more maturely developed in La misa de Arlequín, whose character Américo Arlequín, recognizes the futility of attempting to alter his destiny. He too turns his experience into a game, but only to mock his own project.

CHAPTER I

=====

I N T R O D U C T I O N

=====

"Culto reflexivo, extrañamente anticipado en su obra a un destino de soledad y escepticismo, Meseses consagró su inteligencia a hurgar indicios subterráneos, despoblamientos íntimos, secretos que el mismo, quizás, no podía revelar."

José Balza (1)

GUILLERMO MENESES: A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Guillermo Meneses was born in Caracas on the 15th of December, 1911. He studied law and graduated in 1936. However, it was not his legal profession which absorbed his attention but literature, and journalism was the activity in which he was most systematically engaged.

Meneses worked as a lawyer for five years after his graduation. From 1936 to 1937 he was the Fiscal Attorney in the State of Miranda; from 1937 to 1938, Judge of the First Instance of a Criminal Court in Barcelona, State of Anzoategui, and, for the next three years, 1938 to 1941, Reporter to the Supreme Court in San Juan de Los Morros, State of Guárico.

Simultaneously, he worked as a journalist in the publication of Revista Elite, of which he was Chief Editor between 1938 and 1943. From 1942 until 1945 he was also editor of the daily newspaper Ahora and columnist for the newspaper El Nacional, contributing with a

section called "De una acera a la otra". From 1945 until 1946 Meneses worked in Bogotá as editor-in-chief of the magazine Sábado. After 1948, Meneses' activities were orientated towards a diplomatic career, which he carried out until 1959. During this period he was appointed Second Secretary of the Venezuelan Embassy in Paris (1948-1953), and later First Secretary of the Venezuelan Embassy in Brussels (1953-59).

In 1959 he returned to Venezuela and from then on devoted his life to his literary career which ran parallel to his work as a journalist. So, he collaborated on the newspaper El Universal as a columnist from 1948 to 1968, and from 1959 until 1960, was in charge of the "Página de Cultura" in the newspaper La Esfera. In 1960 he founded and directed the literary magazine entitled C. A. L. (Criticism, Art, Literature) which lasted until 1964. The following year he was elected Cronista de la Ciudad and, as such, directed the municipal magazine "Crónica de Caracas" from number 63 onwards. He also directed and wrote the prologue to volumes VII to XI (numbers 44 to 63) of the Actas del Cabildo de Caracas, published between 1967-69. In 1967 Meneses wrote El Libro de Caracas to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the city. Under the title "Notas de un Cronista" he wrote about various aspects of the city in El Nacional and in the magazine Crónica de Caracas.

Meneses' main concern, regarding the literary aspect of his production, was the narrative genre: novel and short story. However, it does not mean that he did not approach other genres too. In theatre, for instance, he published in 1944 his play El Marido de Nieves Mármol, and in 1967 a collection of essays was published under

the title Espejos y Disfraces.

However, all that activity came to an end when Meneses collapsed, victim of an attack of apoplexy, in December 1967.

Guillermo Meneses belongs to a literary group called "The group of Elite". The designation comes from the publication of the same name whose commemorative edition on September 13th, 1930 marked an important step in the cultural life of Venezuela. On that occasion a group of young Venezuelan intellectuals - among them Meneses - began to publish their works and to discuss matters concerning literature. With regard to that edition, Meneses commented:

"Los comentaristas de literatura venezolana se han ocupado con interés de ese número de Elite (13 de septiembre de 1930) por considerarlo en cierta manera definidor de una generación: la que se forma en los años finales del gobierno del General Juan Vicente Gómez. Sin duda puede señalarse esa edición de Elite como significativa."(2)

...
"Tal vez será interesante ir diciendo las influencias que nos llegaron. Allá por los años de 1930 estábamos los jóvenes dentro de lo que considerábamos la "vanguardia". Nos empapábamos de todo lo que nos hacía pasar Madrid (sobre todo a través de la Revista de Occidente). Ese Madrid de entonces estaba en sana relación europea, de tal manera que no nos era extraño lo francés, lo alemán, lo italiano, lo yanky, que recogía para su revista Ortega. Leíamos a Mann, a Huxkey, a Faulkner, a Jung, a Hesse, a Hauptman, sin olvidarnos de Proust y sin abandonar a Zola, a Queiroz, a Dostoyevski, a Balzac y a nosotros mismos."(3)

The fragment is illustrative of the significance that literary contemporaneity had to Meneses. It explains too the attitude he developed in his artistic activity. His behaviour as a writer was one of permanent investigation, as it is reflected in each of his works. The rehearsal and application of new techniques; constant technical innovation was inspired by the need to find a suitable form to express his inquiry into aspects relating to the problem of identity and the relation between Man and Time with which he was so concerned. The procedures he followed, his approach in focussing the theme, make of him an outstanding figure within the frame of national literature, as José Balza affirms:

"Es cierto que Guillermo Meneses está precedido por las novelas de Uslar Pietri, Blanco Fombona y Díaz Rodríguez, así como también por varias de Rómulo Gallegos; pero el acento indiscriminado en sucesivos puntos de referencia de un mismo personaje o en el agotamiento de una situación que luego será enfocada de manera diferente - viscosa, inquietante - adviene a nuestra literatura sólo con Meneses. Para aquellos novelistas el personaje implicaba nada más un vacío: su visión externa, la cobertura de hechos y comentarios que lo abordan hasta dejar un hueco que debe ser él, el personaje. Meneses es nuestro primer escritor que puede ubicarse en la línea reflexiva y cambiante de Proust ... Para Meneses, ... cada nueva delimitación de un personaje es únicamente el trozo iluminado de la extensión que desconocemos y que de pronto - en el libro - habrá de ser clarificada para establecer nuevamente la inseguridad."(4)

Meneses' personal history can be described as one of unhappiness

and abandonment. His broken marriage and his long-lasting illness condemned him to suffering. However, those who knew him affirm that he never lost his sense of humour, although sometimes his wit could become rather ironic. There is an anecdote which refers to the ceremony in which Meneses donated his manuscripts and royalties to the Universidad Central de Venezuela. Because the formal proceedings were becoming too solemn, at the moment of being thanked, Meneses interrupted the act with a burst of good humour and informality, later reported in El Nacional:

"El rector Layrisse tuvo palabras para el escritor. Lo toma del brazo, y le expresa:

- Guillermo Meneses, la Universidad Central de Venezuela acepta esta responsabilidad con el convencimiento de que podrá crear los mecanismos para que su obra se difunda más y sea conocida por todos los venezolanos, por Latinoamérica y por el mundo. Gracias doctor Meneses, una vez más en nombre de la Universidad Central de Venezuela.

Hay un gran silencio. Meneses lo rompe cuando le dice al rector Layrisse, con su conocido humor:

- ¡Ay, chico, pero no te pongas tan serio...!

Cuando Meneses firmaba el libro del notario, y este le decía: "por aquí doctor, ahora aquí, y firme allá, más acá le falta una firma aquí...!", nuevamente se produce una broma muy característica en él:

- ¡Ah caracha! Tanta cosa para dar algo! Como sería si estuviera pidiendo!"(5)

This occurred in 1976. Three years later, in 1979, he died of

lung congestion after an eleven-year illness . At the moment of his death Rosa Ortega - his companion, nurse and friend - was with him as she indeed had been since 1968. "Creo que me voy a morir un diciembre como mi madre y mi padre..." Meneses had said, and in fact, he died on December 29th, 1979.

MENESES THE WRITER

"El hecho de ser escritor - la certeza de tener la vocación de escritor - reside en la creencia errónea - o verdadera - de poseer un instrumento especialmente destinado a comprender el mundo y a expresar esa comprensión. De tal conciencia resulta además el suponer que dicha facultad es suficientemente importante como para transmitirla a los demás. Por ello es indispensable que la expresión sea también suficiente para dar forma exacta a la imagen del mundo propio del escritor."(6)

For Guillermo Meneses, the two activities of "understanding the world" and "expressing that understanding" were closely cognate. It becomes possible, therefore, to trace the evolution of his thought through the development of his fiction. His maturing technique, his choice of themes, and his use of language are the instruments through which he simultaneously interprets and reflects reality. His narrative output, then, can be seen as the exposition in aesthetic terms of a personal metaphysical vision, and our analysis of his novels and stories will involve us with questions which are both literary and philosophical. What attitude to life does Meneses adopt? How does he order and transform for literary purposes those

experiences of life which matter to him? What conclusions does he draw from reflecting in these particular ways on these particular experiences? For Meneses, the written word is never merely a vehicle; the form of his work reflects and embodies his thinking about the ultimate nature of his world.

The initial stimulus to this thinking is provided by the conflictive character of reality; by the very act of outlining the conflicts he perceives there, the writer begins to define what his own position is. In this sense, Meneses fits the Sartrean notion of a "committed" writer, though for him the commitment which matters most is the writer's commitment to interpret reality:(7)

"El caso del escritor es distinto. Su obra implica un contenido: 'la comprensión del mundo y la expresión de esa comprensión dentro de la forma que conviene para que sea comunicado'. Entonces desde el momento mismo en el cual se ha determinado el trabajo y la comprensión ha sido expresada en comunicación bien realizada, el escritor queda 'colocado' y está comprometido."(8)

We are dealing then, with a writer who is involved in a process of exploration, but also with one who is strongly aware of his involvement. Meneses' particular form of awareness impels him to take into account not only a metaphysical focus in his vision of reality, but also a social one. Despite a general concern with social questions, it is the common experience of metaphysical alienation with which Meneses is concerned - an experience which he discovers in all sorts of conditions of human beings in the course of his work. Meneses' conduct in this respect also recalls the Sartrean

concept of undertaking such a commitment as a "vital project". Meneses' own project is certainly not developed as an active political militancy, but in the literary field his is, nonetheless, a clear, lifelong and fully realized commitment. With this in mind, we may envisage the development of narrative in Meneses - and especially, I would suggest, the development of its structural aspects - as the expression of a "vital project" of his own. And this I take to be his intention of rescuing and restoring Man from the flawed human condition in which he finds himself, for it is this intention which the process of Meneses' reflections throughout his work makes manifest. The representation of human actions in aesthetic terms is the artistic expression of Meneses' deep-seated concern for Man's tragic and mortal destiny. His aim is first to understand this mortal condition, then, to explain it, and finally to transcend it.

Hence Meneses' concern - apparent from his earliest stories onwards - for form as well as for theme. Hence, too, the process of growth to maturity which is revealed as we trace that concern from one novel to the next. The development runs parallel to the successive phases of the author's own life. In Meneses' life as a writer, there is a growth to aesthetic maturity, as he pursues his search for the "forma conveniente" through a series of different fictional strategies.

There are strong reasons, then, for adopting a chronological approach to Meneses' output. Three very early works, Adolescencia, La Balandra Isabel llegó esta tarde and Canción de Negros, none of

them later than 1934, illustrate three different angles of approach to themes, forms and characters; each one attempts to render a particular aspect of reality. In Adolescencia, for instance, the author's main concern is to concentrate on the psychology of Julio Folgar in one particular phase of his puberty. The method chosen is an account of the protagonist's introspective reflections, presented in terms which make evident the author's knowledge about the latest psychological trends. In La Balandra Isabel llegó esta tarde, Meneses' impulse to inquiry takes him to focus on a more strictly metaphysical and existential theme, in which the balance of elements within the story is more perfectly achieved. The narrative is, on the most literal level, a simple love-story, in which an unexpected revelation precipitates a series of actions revealing the psychology of each character. None of those involved in the resulting conflict manifest a clear consciousness about their situation but rather they act as if just moved by instinctive forces. The more ambitious Canción de Negros examines the plight of the negro peasants who migrate to Caracas in search of a better life. It also attempts to convey the distinctive nature of life among blacks through the representation of their distinctive language. This, together with the general form in which the work is composed, tends to impose a closed, cyclical pattern on the story: blackness, neglect, poverty, instability - the terms of the series go on repeating themselves endlessly.

In these early fictions, the line of investigation which Meneses is to follow in his later writings can already be discerned in an incipient state. His explorations of reality will involve social,

psychological and metaphysical aspects. But as time passes, the inquiry will concentrate increasingly on deciphering the philosophical enigma of Man's existence. In the works which follow immediately after these, this preoccupation is less clearly established, but Meneses is already experimenting interestingly with various fictional forms which will be capable of carrying his characteristic concerns. Thus, in Borrachera (1936), attention is focussed once more on the psychological theme - in this case, the state of madness which alcohol produces in the "negro pobre", Antonio - and the narration is constructed in the form of a hallucination that, as suggested by J. Gerendas, recalls the technique of the interior monologue.(9) Luna (1938) presents another case of insanity brought about by the effects of the moonlight on the Indian Malave; Meneses' exploration of his protagonist's mental state involves a degree of linguistic experimentation and, in particular, the use of certain erotic images. The longer novel Campeones (1939) returns to the theme of adolescence, and develops it along the lines of bildungsroman. It is a bitterly ironic story, describing the failure of four friends to achieve their youthful dreams. Meneses does more than merely recount that failure; he offers a number of hints that a background of social injustice is the underlying cause. Yet this suggestion is, in its turn, subordinated to a bleaker, more deterministic view: that Man is condemned already, simple because he is Man.

After 1946 Meneses' choice of subject matter tends to undergo a certain displacement. No longer, as in Canción de Negros or Campeones, are his protagonists considered as representatives of this

or that social group; instead, Meneses is preoccupied with the individual and with the analysis of his personal destiny and situation in the world. This development had been anticipated in Adolescencia, with the episode of the mirror-image, but the precedent had not been followed up; only in 1946 does the theme of reflection upon the self begins to assume a more consistent place in Meneses' work. This phase of development is initiated by TM novel El Mestizo José Vargas (1946). This is a transitional work towards that individualistic focussing and it examines the absence of any defined identity in the protagonist Jose Vargas. Vargas is a "mestizo", the son of a white father and an Indian mother. The novel analyses the social and psychological ambiguity of the "mestizo", and the part which that ambiguity may play in impeding the development of a positive attitude towards his own reality. Meneses states no thesis on this point; rather he gives expression to his own uncertainty about the issue. As if to underline the bewilderment of Vargas as a hybrid in search of his own identity, the final image of the novel evokes the immensity of the open horizon. Thus, Meneses carries his quest forward to the point where his writing begins to take its shape from the kind of ambiguous answers which that quest is bound to evoke.

It is the negative character of these answers which is more evident in the stories which follow - El Duque and Un Destino Cumplido (both 1946), and Alias el Rey (1947). There the search leads to the revelation that there is no basis for hope about the possibility of changing human destiny. All forethought, all effort, all hope, is predestined to failure. The result of this is a

bitterly sarcastic and anguished tone, as in El Duque and Un Destino Cumplido, or a mood of hatred, as in Alias el Rey.

Yet in 1948 there appeared another short story, Tardío regreso a través de un espejo, in which Meneses seemed to have found the way out of this trap. This story appears to suggest that the poet, as a creator, may be in possession of the essential clue. Yet the figure of the child Raul Kaufman, reflected in the depth of the mirror into which the poet Jose Prados looks, has strong moral associations: Purity, Honesty, lack of prejudice - these ethical principles appear as the preconditions of any hope. Nonetheless, the hint is still there that true poetry can offer a valid means of escape from unpleasant reality.

Up to this point, Meneses has sought for an explanation of Man's situation in the world, a meaning for his existence, and an adequate response to his mortality. But from whatever perspective he approached the problem, the answers have invariably been ambiguous, uncertain, or nonsensical. His reaction to this outcome will, indeed, be an escape into aesthetics - but it will be a purposive one. Meneses, in future, will attempt to clarify the initial problem by devising a solution at the level of aesthetics, by casting the unrewarding results of his quest in a fictional form which is fully adequate to their own ambiguous nature. Such an achievement can itself be seen as the attainment of something meaningful, provided that literary creation is accepted as an end in itself. That is what Meneses' later work will assume it to be.

All this begins to be fully apparent in the important short

story La mano junto al muro (1951). This tale may be seen as a summing up of the quest to which Meneses has thus far been committed, and as in his own case, the quest which is pursued within the story - the investigation of a murder - gets nowhere. It is bound to get nowhere for, though all the elements seem to be solid and reliable, in fact, they are not. Because they belong to the domain of ambiguity born from the depths of a mirror, from a cry, no one knows whether it was one of life or death. And from the silhouette of a hand upon a stone wall, whose movement may have been saying "aquí, aquí" or "adiós, adiós, adiós."

Yet, La mano junto al muro is only a preliminary rehearsal of what will be Meneses' total rejection of objective Reality. The writer, unable to arrive at the kind of answers which will prove convincing to his anguish, creates an alternative world which is itself the reflection of the emptiness underlying what is supposedly "real". The ultimate expression of that reflective function will be the novel El falso cuaderno de Narciso Espejo (1952). The device around which this work is constructed is the implementation, in fictional terms, of a game with parallel mirrors, through whose reflections Meneses is able to achieve his aim of denying reality, for he is able to demonstrate the inconsistency of its foundations. To this end, the work is presented as a set of documents, each one of which enunciates a strictly relative truth. The internal organization of the work demands that we confront these documents with one another; the result, given the nature of the documents themselves, is a series of contradictions which are the real substance of the novel. Each document purports to be a mirror, but the reflections which it

offers are rendered doubtful by the ambivalent impact of some other reflection. These contrasting testimonies define a new dimension of reality, and it is precisely this new dimension which permits the construction of an alternative reality. The void created by the contradictions has to be filled from a new source altogether, the reader's judgment. That in its turn, of course, is subject to a similar process of reflection, and doubtless, of betrayal, thus defining a further void, which new acts of creative judgment have to fill. What happens, therefore, is a process of substitution: given that any relationship with objective reality is impossible, the creative artist simply opts to deny that reality. This denial involves him in a continuous process of creative activity which can, at least, divert his thoughts from the ultimate truth, nothingness.

Yet this solution will not do either. The human tragedy cannot be shut out from experience; it exists and it persists. Man is still present in the world; that cannot be ignored. And so, the artist who keeps faith with himself will ultimately encounter Man once more. He does so, when at the end of El falso cuaderno... the narrator affirms:

"Para terminar insisto en afirmar que yo no soy Narciso Espejo. Me llamo Pedro Pérez - u otro nombre sin especial distinción - y soy un hombre - uno como tantos - que escucha sus propios pasos en el silencio de las calles nocturnas y piensa en la angustia del compañero desaparecido."(10)

The artist here has left the circle of partial and subjective reflections; instead, he now identifies himself with the whole human

race in a dimension of experience which purports to be universal. The attempt to escape has failed, as is corroborated by the short story El Destino es un dios olvidado. For the artist, however, all that this means is that he must persist in his attempts though with a different attitude. And so, in order to be true to himself, Meneses undertakes La misa de Arlequín (1972). In it, he explores in turn the several aspects of his life-long existential commitment. La Misa de Arlequin gathers into itself all the main elements which have been developed in the course of its author's literary career. It is, in fact, the synthesis of his inquiry into life. It aims at being a total fiction, in the sense that the world of Meneses' range of subjects, methods and forms is condensed into a single fictional expression - a fiction capable of representing, at one and the same time, both existence and the impossibility of apprehending it.

CHAPTER II

EARLY STORIES: EXPLORATIONS

To begin with the analysis of Meneses' works and with regard to his short stories, I would like to explain that the criterion of selection we have followed is Meneses' own according to his collection Diez Cuentos. In each case, these short stories will be followed by the chronologically corresponding novel. To open the study we are going to look at Adolescencia, a short story dated 1934.

ADOLESCENCIA (1934)

In this story the main concern is to focus attention on a psychological crisis; it involves an insight into an adolescent at the time of his puberty, just when he is becoming aware of his sexuality. It is developed through an introspective account which, by its allusion to the archetypal image of the mother, recalls certain Jungian postulates. The story presents Julio Folgar: adolescent, fifteen years old, the child of a well-established bourgeois family, who is a pupil at a religious school. One day he is caught up in absent-minded reverie during an address by the College's spiritual Director, to whom he is supposed to be listening. For some time he has been unable to concentrate properly on his normal activities; instead he is given over to eager reflections, which lead him to establish parallels and associations between himself and the rest of the world. This is what has contributed to his inattention in the chapel, and the consequent punishment by Father Fernández. That day, after school, Julio Folgar continues his reveries in the back garden

of his house, and it is there that his preoccupation begins to take shape:

"Y de pronto, Julio brinco' ... Recordando el sermón del padre Echeverrieta había pensado en eso que nunca había debido pensar.

Tanto miedo le brincó dentro que sintió el golpe de su sangre, recio en el silencio del atardecer; tanto miedo le invadió, que salió corriendo hasta su cuarto y se echó en la cama apretándose contra las almohadas: ¡había pensado en eso! ..."(1)

Desire, eroticism, sensuality - the revelation scares the boy.

However, he comes to accept it as a natural transition. Then:

"Cuando se dio cuenta de que estaba casi tranquilo, cuando comprendió que su sangre volvía a correr con el pulso habitual y que sus pensamientos regresaban al apacible ritmo de siempre, se levantó de la cama, encendió la luz y fue hasta el espejo del lavabo. Tuvo que sonreír, satisfecho de su serenidad, cuando vio en su cara como una pálida máscara de pierrot adolescente, plácido, sentimental. Entonces sonrió más: ya podía pensar de nuevo en lo que había pensado en el corral. Buscaría ayuda del demonio, sería un héroe de la sensualidad y haría de su vida un brillante amontonamiento de placeres; esa estampa del espejo -romántica, bobalicona, pedante, se convertiría pronto en la figura de un gran vividor despreciativo que tiene canas antes de ser viejo..."(2)

Obviously, Julio equates sensual fulfilment with aging. At this moment, Julio Folgar becomes conscious of his discovery and determines to make the most of the domain of pleasure. Finally, the

next day, after some further thought, Julio has an encounter in which:

"Adoró la fuerza variable de la Vida, grandiosa como un bello destino humano. Como si fuera poseedor de una nueva Lámpara Maravillosa de Aladino, se sintió amo de una extraordinaria potencia que le cubría de belleza las cosas habituales y adoró en sí mismo, bajo el templo de su corral, ese enorme afán. Con otro nombre, adoró al viejo Dios Falo y a Satanás."(3)

The plot of this work develops over the course of two days, with a brief reference to the morning of the third day. The story has been imagined from the perspective of a narrator who delves into Julio Folgar's inner being to reveal the whole process which is taking place within him. To achieve this, the narrator dissects the intimate thoughts of his character. This brings us to the second important aspect of the story: its exposition. The story is introduced by an apparently neutral voice, speaking in Latin:

"Hic est enim quid dictus est par
Isaiam profetam, dicentem: Vox
clamantis in deserto: parate viam
Domini, rectas facite semitas
ejus."(4)

This has the double function of creating an imposing and mystical atmosphere, and of providing an early clue to the plot: "a voice crying in the wilderness" offers a hint of the state of crisis which adolescence brings. In order to focus the phenomenon more objectively, Meneses, instead of making direct use of internal monologue, opts for a narrator who knows so much about Julio Folgar

that, eventually, he becomes the voice of his protagonist's consciousness. However, in order to reach that point there has to be a gradual process of approaching the character. Julio's inner being is only disclosed after the situation has been adequately prepared. Thus, after the imposing Latin words of the opening, the narrator shifts his attention to a description of the scene whose aim is to define the background against which the events are to evolve:

"En la atmósfera azulada de la capilla, entre el olor del incienso y de la cera, se desleía la voz del Padre Echeverrieta..."(5)

Only after a further digression about the priest's appearance does the narrator continue with the introduction of his protagonist Julio Folgar. Because the narration has approached the environment before the character, the total situation becomes a kind of lens through which we are finally brought to see the figure we have been expecting to see since the beginning:

"En el fondo de la capilla, junto al confesionario solemne, Julio Folgar - moreno, flaco, patiquín de 15 años - sonrió dando un codazo a su vecino."(6)

We reach this character the very moment when he whispers to his friend: "Mírale la boca". This remark is by no means casual; the narrator has chosen that moment in order to underline a particular feature of the adolescent age: the tendency to be irreverent. In Julio's case this irreverence provides a release for the tensions that are building up within him. A restlessness which he cannot yet define is the impulse behind his behaviour, the basis of that first

moment of his conduct which the narrator has just allowed us to witness. In similarly subtle fashion the description provided here prepares the ground to bring us closer to the main concern: the character's inner life.

"En el estanque azulado de la capilla, en el agua piadosa y devota que se apretaba entre las oscuras paredes, en la penumbra quieta y beata, se extendía la alta voz dulzona que arrullaba y adormecía a los colegiales. Tal vez Julio Folgar era el único que apoyándose en el relato de su profesor, se divertía imaginando de nuevo las escenas con añadidos tomados del cine y de sus libros, mezclando los misterios y mandatos religiosos con el empuje de su imaginación."(7)

The phrase "voz dulzona que arrullaba y adormecía a los colegiales" reinforces the impression that we have caught the character in a moment of inattention. It also allows the narrator to slip into Julio's own consciousness. From this point onward, he can begin to disclose who Julio Folgar really is; all we knew up to now was "Julio Folgar, moreno, flaco, patiquín de 15 años." Now more information is given: Its aim is to account for the evocations generated by Father Echeverrieta's words. By means of an accumulation of images the story develops simultaneously in two directions: one that turns inwards, delving into the character's mind, revealing his concern and his background; and another of a more external nature, which provides the setting of the story. Thus, the introspective experience is developed in the form of a counterpoint between the flow of images and Father Echeverrieta's speech. For

example:

"El tenía un libro de estampas en el que estaba grabado el bautismo de Jesús.

... Juan estaba vestido con una piel de camello. Era un perseguido, un hombre violento que luchaba contra los poderosos, que acusaba a Herodes de ser adúltero con la mujer de su hermano...

... Salomé ... Julio Folgar ha visto a una bailarina en el Teatro Olimpia, que baila el fox-trot. Salomé con una falda de cintas y el vientre desnudo y dos redondeles brillantes en los pechos ...

Bailando va,
Suavemente sutil
la celestial Salomé...

Al hacerse más recia la voz del padre Echeverrieta le apagó los pensamientos. Apretándose la panza con las blancas manos gordezuelas, el Director Espiritual hacia sus consideraciones..."(8)

The images evolve by a process of association which goes from Father Echeverrieta's voice to Julio Folgar's visual memories, and then, by way of his reflections, to more general areas of his experience. The move towards Julio's inner thoughts starts from the immediate reality, the process increases its evocative strength through strong visual effects at each stage of association - images of Jesus, John the Baptist, Salome, naked belly, and then, less expectedly, the transmutation of this erotic motif into a kind of melody - only to be interrupted as the priest's harsh voice suddenly comes to dominate it. Father Echeverrieta's voice is allowed to cut through the imagery because the objective has been achieved: the theme has already been suggested. Subsequently, the priest's speech

and the topics of Julio Folgar's imagination continue in close parallelism:

"Con rapidez de hachazos entraban las imágenes en el pensamiento del muchacho; hubiera querido abarcar todo el poderío de la tercera tentación; pero no podía gozar de ninguno de los escenarios que se fingía, porque enseguida, frases de sus novelas o de sus textos o recuerdos del cine y del teatro, traían otra escena, otros personajes y otros intereses."(9)

Gradually, the reader is given a global impression of Julio Folgar's state of mind. As this impression is built up, the story moves towards a clearly defined sense of anguish, born from the confrontation between Julio's senses and Father Echeverrieta's teachings. This disturbing contradiction demands a resolution, and that, once arrived at, will concentrate Julio self-awareness in a newly defined sense of purpose. The force which will, ultimately, shape Julio's thoughts will be the vital movement of nature reinforced by all the processes in the vegetable and animal kingdoms. He sees in nature a reflection and representation of his own as yet unexpressed desire of sexuality.

"Manchadas de luna se abren las flores para que el grano de polen que danza en el viento entre a fecundar el escondido seno redondo y, entonces, se despereza el matorral, botando en la brisa un arisco perfume; en la negra hondura del mar o en los pozos verdes de los ríos que duermen sus remansos bajo la gigante sombra de las selvas; entre los árboles húmedos o junto al fango fofo de los bosques, corre el calofrío sagrado que madura todas las simientes, lo mismo que se extienden en la tibia

atmósfera de su alcoba los alocados
pensamientos."(10)

An association is established between this image of burgeoning nature and a particular memory which has become important to Julio.

"... Recordó una pareja que viera la otra noche, cuando paseaba en automóvil: un hombre y una mujer que formaban amoroso montón en un recodo oscuro de la carretera del Valle; se le vino a la mente la frase de su chofer: Ah gente pa' gozá!, y comprendió definitivamente que sólo satanás poseía los tesoros hacia los cuales se alzaban sus deseos como una gran llama de pasión. Los curas podían decir lo que quisieran, pero..."(11)

The emergence of sexuality is the theme disclosed by Adolescencia. The narrative is designed to be as faithful as possible to the various characteristics of the phenomenon. Anguish is the feature of the process which the narrator underlines most emphatically. He does so by confronting his character with decisions whose implications are especially painful - essentially, whether to relapse into childhood, or to undertake the journey towards maturity. Confronted with a world of unknown experience, Julio succumbs to a tendency towards isolation which keeps him attached to his internal world, whose outstanding feature is sensuality. It is this which makes the process of his adolescent growth so peculiarly intense.

The mystery of love, sex, passion - all this is what concerns Julio Folgar now. His emergent sexuality directs his attention to a discovery of his new self, and a re-examination of his values in the light of the new circumstances. Questions about his future are

raised, bringing even more uncertainty. It is in this state of mind that Julio one night gets up in the middle of a dream: "Un relámpago azulado lo levantó del sueño. Su primer pensamiento, fue el verso de Ruben Darío: y la carne que tienta con sus frescos racimos ..."

"En seguida, como si algo lo guiara, se sentó en la cama. Algún ruido extraño había oído. Se vistió el pijama nuevamente y salió hasta la puerta. Miró, siguió caminando hasta el comedor. En el último cuarto, donde se guardan los vinos y las comidas, había luz; cuando iba seguir hasta allá, salía su madre. Arreglándose el pelo, sujetando con sus manos delgadas el kimono de seda, ella le habló con voz cálida, que los años hicieron un poco temblorosa:

- ¿Qué buscas, Julio?
- Nada, que vi luz en el cuarto de guardar.
- Ya vez. Era yo. Vamos a dormir.
- Es que no tengo sueño.
- No, hombre. Ahora nos acostamos los dos.

Le pasó el brazo por la cintura y lo retiró enseguida:

- Ya eres un hombrazo. Estás fuerte. Vas a tener que ponerte pantalones largos ahorita.
¿Te parece bueno el día de tu santo?
- Por supuesto, mamá.

- Bueno. Anda a acostarte. Anda. Te voy a arropar como cuando estabas chiquito.

Así fue. las manos de la madre, apenas rozandolo, con una delicada pureza, le componían la sábana cómodamente.

...
Ella sonrió triste y se fue, dejando su olor dulce en el cuarto. Julio se durmió pronto y una imagen viva de su sueño anterior volvió a llenarlo: eran unos labios

enormes que se acercaban siempre y
sangraban una extraña sangre
espiritual, inexistente,
literaria."(12)

This scene seems to be related to the archetypal idea of the woman as a guide; it is as if Julio's mother, acknowledging his growing up, came to offer him her help to find his way. To reinforce this affirmation attention should be drawn to the scene's ambiguity. It is a scene that presents the woman rather than the mother. The figure emerging from the night: "Arreglándose el pelo, sujetando con sus manos delgadas el kimono de seda..." is a shot which is deliberately suggestive. Though, immediately, it is neutralized by the next statement: "...ella le habló con su voz cálida, que los años hicieron un poco temblorosa". There is the suggestion that a sort of Oedipal feeling is being overcome by the archetypal figure of female guidance, understood in her protective and pedagogical role. This affirmation is founded on the fact that in Julio Folgar, the feelings of guilt or desire are not manifest; on the contrary, what he reflects is a warm acceptance of maternal authority.(14)

Adolescencia is a story in which our understanding of the theme is advanced very largely by means of imagery. This can range from the simplest expressions, through the accumulation of associations, to a highly complex type of image whose main characteristic is a profound sense of lyricism. An example would be the following:

"Esta tarde, está acostado en la
húmeda tierra oscura del corral ...
- ¿Por qué tan altas - tan aaaaltas
- las ramas del eucaliptus?
Julio esta cansado; siente el
cuerpo friolento, rígido; todo él
está lleno de una perezosa y
soñolienta melancolía; tendido

sobre la oscura tierra fresca y olorosa, podría estarse hasta siempre, mirando el sol embebido en las ramas del eucaliptus ..."

"Un compañero de colegio, hijo de un capitán de barco, dice que de los árboles muy altos se hacen los mástiles de las goletas; así, esos árboles están destinados a luchar siempre contra el viento: cuando están vivos, chupando savia y soles, sostienen el peso de las ramas, se balancean serenamente entre la brisa; luego, cuando los cortan, sostienen los grandes pañuelos blancos de las velas, donde se acuna el bravo viento del mar y, si se anuncia una oscura tormenta, los marineros suben por las jarcias, les arrancan las velas, los dejan desnudos bajo la lluvia, bajo el pesado empujón de las furias ...

Es una vida brava la de los marineros. A Julio le gustaría ser oficial de un gran transatlántico de los que viajan por Indochina y por Japón..."(14)

A single object, a eucaliptus tree, brings together, one after another, the associations which finally reveal the full content of the character's fantasies. The passage also demonstrates Meneses' deepening insight into the character's inner being, and the detailed course of his reflections. Once the secret thoughts which multiply in Julio's mind have been penetrated, these images become the main content of the story.

When Meneses is trying to define the cultural background of his character, a different, more intellectually based method of exposition will be in order. Synthesis and summary are essential elements here:

"La Historia Antigua la explicaba el Padre Fernández ... la voz del

profesor al describir la victoria de Espartaco o el brillo del Imperio Visigodo. ("Folgaba el rey Rodrigo con la hermosa Cava en la ribera del Tajo sin testigo"). En aquel tiempo el apellido Folgar era una grosería... Los árabes triunfaron y fue otro el poder y otro reino con las mezquitas españolas y tiendas de seda en el desierto como en la película "El Hijo del Sheik". Y vino el Cid, pero antes, Carlos Martel derrotó a los moros en los Campos Cataláunicos. Las Horcas Caudinas, los Campos Cataláunicos. Carlos Martel. Carlo Magno. "Quand l'arme de Charle Magne revient d'Espagne, l'arriere-garde, commandée par le compte Roland, fut attaquée par les Basques dans la gorge profonde de Roncevaux..." Así era la leyenda de Durandal en el texto de Francés. Carlo-Magno. Carlos Quinto. Carlos Tercero. Fernando Séptimo. Los Incas. Los Aztecas. Guaicaipuro y los Capitanes Generales de Venezuela. Emparan dijo: "Yo tampoco quiero mando", y luego fue Miranda y Bolívar: "Si la naturaleza se opone..."(15)

The interplay of imagery with precisely-recorded cultural data generates a new perspective of reality. Adolescencia is a story in which the focus is on a self-absorbed character; therefore his perception of the world reflects his personal circumstance. Yet he is also a character whose cultural background determines in him the moral vision and the values of bourgeois society. In these two respects the figure of Julio Folgar anticipates all the Bohemians and lonely men who are to be presented in Meneses' narrative.(16)

LA BALANDRA ISABEL LLEGO ESTA TARDE (1934)

This is the story of the love affair between Segundo Mendoza and Esperanza. The story is very simply plotted, its theme is a reflection on the basic inability of human beings to command their own destiny.

Segundo Mendoza has been visiting Esperanza for some time. She is a prostitute and works around the harbour of La Guaira where Segundo's sloop calls regularly. They have been having an affair which is interrupted when Esperanza tells Segundo of her desire to give up her current style of living and settle down to bring up the baby she believes she is expecting. Segundo, touched by the woman's words, decides to stay with her and fulfil her dreams. However, after a few hours, when the sloop is about to sail, he draws up a mental balance between Esperanza's hopes and his own desires, and concludes that, in fact, he prefers to go away. So, he hurries aboard, leaving Esperanza behind with her broken dreams.

In La Balandra Isabel... the characters are representative of the popular sector; people related to the life of the sea. Their life is perceived as the sum of the demands each day imposes. Their actions and reactions are an honest projection of their needs and feelings. There are no double standards in their behaviour; their actions respond to a personal code whose enactment is the accomplishment of their destiny. The main action of the story is the breaking off of the relationship between Segundo and Esperanza. The incident, at first sight, appears unfair to Esperanza. But this unfairness is of lesser importance than another theme: an objective

consideration of what Life is. Both Segundo and Esperanza, each in their own way, move according to circumstances, and these do not always meet their initial expectations. The outcome of events is always known to them; all that they can do is walk blindly onwards, a step at a time.

To develop this idea, the narrator expounds the course of events along economical and straightforward lines. The story opens in a harmonious atmosphere; after a period of absence Segundo Mendoza returns to the port and goes to see Esperanza. The encounter between them is marked by tenderness and affection because there is a basic understanding about the circumstances of each other. That is why, later that night when Esperanza tells Segundo about her feelings, the man's reaction towards this new feature in their relationship involves a profound tenderness:

"Se la quedó mirando. No le conocía ni el cuerpo aunque creyera lo contrario. Ahora tiene la cara suavemente triste dentro del sueño y del cuerpo solemne bajo la sábana delgada. Se la queda mirando y dentro de su pecho brotan dulces mieles de cariño."(16)

The woman becomes a revelation for him. What might have been an encounter based merely on force of habit becomes a disturbing experience, evocative of other considerations too:

"En este momento la acariciaría despacio, la besaría más serenamente que a la otra que tiene allá en Juan Griego. Ha sido de repente un cariño maduro, confiado. Hasta este momento se creía obligado únicamente para la otra, para la que, seguramente, tiene ahora en derredor de su falda los

hijos de los dos."(17)

These are the facts, plainly seen by the man's consciousness; their very reality confuses him and motivates this reflection:

"¿Y esta? ¿Y Esperanza?
También tiene derecho. Aprieta
dentro del cuerpo sus dolores como
cualquier otra. Sólo, que nadie se
preocupa más que por el cuerpo
repleto de dulzuras."(18)

At the moment of confrontation with the facts a contradiction arises in the shape of two parallel demands. On first impulse Segundo reacts, moved by the good faith inherent in his character, and waking Esperanza says: "Negrita. Atiende. Si tú quieres vamos a vivir juntos". However, further reflections evoke the possibility of conflict with Segundo's other concerns. Then yet another consideration appears:

"¿... el de pescador, matarse
sudando agachado en una canoa, para
luego apenas ganar? En la
balandra, siquiera no gasta en
comida, sino que los reales son
para lo que quiera, Esperanza le
pedirá dinero siempre. Dirá sus
temores de que no habrá nada para
el siguiente día. Y la figura de
la mujer se le va desvaneciendo.
Será dura y fastidiosa la
vida."(19)

These concrete considerations reflect the unmerciful, and ultimately irresistible demands of day-to-day reality. Thus, Segundo's eventual reaction obeys an instinctive necessity for self assertion; the inconsistency of his behaviour responds rather to an impulse than to a calculated decision to abandon Esperanza.

Segundo's style of life calls for something different from domestic routine; indeed, he cannot begin to see himself attached to such a commitment, hence his desertion. He knows he likes to be a sailor; he is also aware of his other woman and the children; she is at the end his ultimate decision, which is just as honest as his earlier offer to Esperanza. Because he opts for whatever seems the most true for him.

Esperanza's first reaction to her loss is resignation. This she then feebly combats by calling on supernatural forces for help. It is the only possible way out which she can conceive; for the rest of the time, she remain motionless, overcome by despondency. Incapable of any effective action, she places her hopes on whatever her instinct suggests. Esperanza is emotional and reality demands considered and effective attitudes; that is the cause of her failure. As Judith Gerendas interprets it,

"Con su ansia de cambiar, de alcanzar la felicidad, de ser lo que no es y de poseer al hombre que ama, ella no hace nada por lograr la transformación de su circunstancia, de lo que ella quiere ser. Se confía a las fuerzas sobrenaturales que para ella son parte de la naturaleza. Es pasiva, espera la renovación desde fuera, de algo que no puede modificar ni controlar mediante una actividad consciente ... Finalmente, fracasa y regresa a lo mismo que aspiró dejar."(20)

For Esperanza there is no experience of challenge but steady return to her routine, a succession of steps which leads her to Martinote, Segundo's friend, who tells her:

"... Segundo Mendoza es ahora capitán de un falucho. Navega nada más que por oriente. No volverá. Si me quieres a mí para esta noche ...
Esperanza sonrió llorosa ...
Bueno, Martinote. Pero me llevas bastante real, ¿sabes? Nos vamos a emborrachar hasta dormirnos."(21)

Esperanza and Segundo are the faces of the same coin: Existence. From whichever side we approach them, they underline the inability of Man to comprehend his destiny since it belongs to mechanisms over which Man has no control.

Meneses presents this story through a narrator who is complete master of the situation. He illustrates its setting in one continuous camera-like movement. The setting is a maritime one whose central motif is the presentation of the manoeuvres of "la balandra Isabel" arriving at the port.

"La Balandra 'Isabel' llegó esta tarde a La Guaira... Al entrar en el puerto agilizó más su elegancia blanca; pasó junto al transatlántico alemán y fue hacia sus compañeras: la goleta 'Blanca María', el bote 'Justa y María', la balandrilla 'Misterios del Mar'. Al lado de ellas se aquietó, mientras las velas, antes de morir, recogían en su blancura la última luz del sol. La mayor, que tiene una cruz azul pintada como un tatuaje, y que, desde Boca de Uchire viene llena de viento, esponjada y redonda - pintada de sol o pintada de luna - se aflojó despacio en los mástiles, desgonzándose entre la brisa

delgada del puerto."(22)

The narrator here produces a painting in which the visual strength of the imagery presents a vivid background against which the characters will act. Attention now moves from one detail of the scene to another, finally coming to rest on the figure of a sailor. This picture, which forms the introduction of the story, also contains its main elements; it is a story of seamen and women; but in formal terms it is a tale of arrival and departures, of going away and coming back, like the movements of the boats and of the waves.

After the introduction, the narrator moves to the presentation of his characters. Segundo and Esperanza appear, to all intents and purposes simultaneously:

"Segundo Mendoza, marinero de la 'Isabel' - nariz chata, anchas espaldas, blanca la risa amplia - paseó un rato por las calles guaireñas... Bajo la cachucha, tirada hacia el cogote, viven sus pensamientos: sabe que terminará buscando a Esperanza para pasar la noche; pero retarda el momento en que ella vendrá apresurada hacia él (¿Cómo estás mi amor, como hiciste el viaje?) por el solo gusto de gozar antes representándose la escena, pensando cómo va la mujer a recibirlo."(23)

This simultaneity is in keeping with Meneses' aim of achieving a balanced assessment of the conduct of both protagonists. He seeks, quite simply, to give the facts of their situation, without value judgments; therefore, there can be no question of giving either of

these characters an idealized description or even of giving one of them priority over the other. Instead, both are conveyed to us, as the story unfolds, through characteristic details and gestures, and, in a piece of remarkably economical writing, both appear at once. From this initial image of Segundo Mendoza, as he walk along thinking of Esperanza, the narrator slips into Segundo's thoughts, thus, at the same time as the man's image is presented, the woman also emerges, by some of her gestures and attributes. The reference to Segundo's hat becomes an excuse to shift the external view to discover what is happening inside Segundo's brain. Under Segundo's hat we find not his head but his thoughts. And his thoughts are of Esperanza, conveying an image of her which is all movement, voice and kindness, - these being her most relevant features. One character is not made more important to us than the other. In each case, there is a straightforward presentation of key elements in their disposition and attitudes. The narrator makes use of his full freedom in selecting these. But, instead of pausing to analyse what happens between them he simply states it and passes on, to such an extent that when the characters appear the dramatic action undercuts the position of the narrator who remains on the sidelines as a sort of spectator. For instance:

"(Ella: regordeta, pintada, con sus curvas marcadas en el brillo de la tela barata. Ella: alegre gritona, simpática.)

- ¿Llegaste esta tarde?
- Sí, ¡oh! nos atrasamos
- ¡Te esperas un momento y le digo al que esta ahí que no me voy a ir con él!
- Anda, pues.

...
Esperanza se acercó a Segundo
moviendo sus caderas hermosas,
robustas.
El no se movió. Quieto, sintió el
roce de aquel brazo, de todo el
cuerpo de Esperanza. Quieto sintió
la voz de ella.

- Tenemos toda la noche para los
dos.
- Si, ¡oh! Si llego más tarde me
quedo sin mujer.
- Cualquiera te lo cree... que no
te vas a buscar otra.

- ¿Yo, mi amor? Contigo nada más.
- San Segundo, te voy a tener que
meter en un nicho.
- Verdad
- ¿Qué es lo que me tienes que
decir?"(24)

In this example the narrator introduces the action and leaves the dialogue to flow spontaneously to reveal the characters' idiosyncracies. However, there are also occasions where the narrator's intervention is opportune in that it emphasizes some significant aspects of the particular moment, as here:

"Segundo come con hambre
grandísima, sorbiendo el café
humeante en la tazota desconchada
mientras oye a Esperanza.
- Ya ve¿. Y llegué hoy que no me
esperabas. Bueno y ¿qué es lo
grande que me vas a decir?"(25)

The picture seems almost photographic, like a virtual "snapshot" of the situation. In fact, the narrator attempts to reproduce as many details of the scene as possible, but these are by no means all visual ones. The character is hungry, it is explained, and a variety of sensory images are deployed to complete the account:

"...sorbiendo el café humeante en la tazota desconchada", the senses of smell, taste and touch are all involved in the total effect of the description.

This handling of images is one of the resources which Meneses exploits with most success. Skillfully he chooses the outstanding features of some situations and develops these data according to the effect which happens to interest him. For instance, in the next example, the treatment of light and shade is the most notable feature. Out of the fundamental opposition between shadow and light there emerges the pathetic expression on the face of the mad woman.

"La llama de fósforo saltó entre las manos gruesas del marinero y en su luz vivieron los rasgos de la negra María, sus pómulos hinchados, toda la cara avejentada, rota por la miseria, por la locura y por la vida."(26)

"La llama de fósforo salto ... y en su luz vivieron los rasgos de la negra María ..." There can be no question about the suggestive power of that picture, its dramatic force recalls some of the Goya's phantasmagoria, in which the horror and madness of disfigured faces also repeat expressions of anguish and misery. On other occasions, the purpose of the images is to translate the message of the senses into the terms of some other, more personal experience. In these cases, the resulting product can be a very personalised kind of imagery. For instance:

"Parecía una mujer. Porque todas las cosas del mar pueden parecerse a la mujer. Se hinchan las velas como pechos redondos; en el calor

del sol hay un regazo ardiente y en
los vientos toda una gran caricia
amplia. Cuando chocan las olas,
dentro de las espumas rotas, viven
los brazos desnudos y muslos y
suaves torsos de mujer. Las
tierras lejanas también son ariscas
muchachitas oscuras dormidas sobre
el mar."(27)

This type of image conveys the secret code of Meneses' sensuality, which the narrator presents as a dimension of Segundo's sensitivity. The lyrical tone of this passage depends on the displacement achieved through the succession of metaphors. The association sea/woman is developed systematically to the point where the range of metaphors appears virtually open-ended.

Another feature of this story is the conclusion of an episode of witchcraft, the magic ceremony set by Pedro Martin and negra Maria, including the flashback to memories of Bocu, the Cuban sorcerer, actually their father. This episode has a double function. Formally it helps to generate some suspense towards the end; thematically, it both offers another feature of these characters' lives and gives Meneses the opportunity to explore those occult and ritualistic celebrations which hold such an attraction for him. The episode includes the performance of a magic ritual in which a supernatural power is conferred, by means of which it is hoped that circumstance can be brought under Man's control. The mysterious story of Bocu underlines Meneses' curiosity about the magical approach to reality. The cult of sorcery and the use of magical aid are common features of all early cultural stages, and here these things are presented as residual features of a situation of cultural "mestizaje",

characteristic of the Caribbean (among other areas). To some extent, it is still to be found there at popular levels, often in the form of an atavistic "half-belief" invoked in times of particular stress and crisis. It is this kind of circumstantial approach to magic which Esperanza attempts; although, even she herself is not fully convinced of its results, because the notion of her inevitable failure is already at work within her.

CANCION DE NEGROS (1934)

This novel is the story of a series of individuals who share a common destiny: poverty, ignorance, an existence at the mercy of chance. As Alicia Segal puts it:

"...es la narración del azar como vivencia íntima y efecto social. Negros, nacidos en cualquier parte, hijos de alguna con alguien, son los protagonistas múltiples de esta novela..."

"...una historia que se repite en varias existencias - semejantes o idénticas - otorgan el sentido de personaje masa que el autor premeditó."(29)

The novel is organised in three main sections: El Pueblo, La Cárcel and La Ciudad. Each section is designed to project the negroes' way of life, their attitude towards reality, and the meaning which life has for them. The work is built up around images which present the characters at some moments of their everyday lives; the narrator captures them in their most spontaneous attitudes. It is by

no means accidental that the initial image of the story should be a scene from Pedro's domestic life.

"Acompañada del olor de cocina llegó la voz de ella, que estaba haciendo café. Y, a través de la pared, blanca de cal, se hizo el diálogo. El le dice negrita, mi amorcito, mi amor. Le repite muchas veces, añiñadas por los diminutivos, las mismas cosas. Pregunta ella, si está muy cansado, si está muerto de hambre. Y él: que sí, que ha estado trabajando hasta ahorita y que ya lo creo que tiene hambre. Un momento se quedó callado viendo entrar a su mujer, pero enseguida volvió a soltar su chorro de cariños, mientras ella nombraba las comidas que le había hecho. Cachapas, arepas, las caraotas fritas, la carne tostada, humeante todavía."(30)

This intimate scene establishes the picture of an ordinary couple whose existence flows quietly. It also introduces the first section of the story, which will relate how unforeseen circumstances come to impose a different pattern of life on these individuals. Pedro's life-style will last only until the day Ana Dolores dies in childbirth of her long hoped-for baby. However, as life still goes on for him, the necessity for companionship prevails, and one day he finds himself thinking:

"Hay que buscar una mujer. No como esta sino ... Nada. Una mujer...
... El sábado siguiente trae del pueblo a Gregoria (18 años. Trigueña. Delgada. Linda)
Han pasado dos años de la muerte de Ana Dolores."(31)

That is life. A plain succession of events, guided by the demands imposed by necessity. The series of flatly-related, everyday actions which the character carries out responds to events and needs which, it is assumed, could give rise to no other possible course of action. In that sense, the characters live an 'objective' life: that of natural objects in a natural world. That is the nature of the process which associates Pedro with Gregoria, and later Gregoria with Julian.

Life, considered in terms of that natural flow, presupposes a pattern of causality based upon random chance. Thus, when things happen, there is no such thing as a crisis of choice or regret; the characters merely follow through their predetermined line of behaviour to its end. This leads to the second section, the prison, in which some of its consequences are examined and evaluated.

The prison chapters describe the misery of those whose actions have come into contradiction with the rules imposed by society. In social terms, their failure constitutes a transgression which leads to a punishment: confinement. The characters themselves, however, do not see their imprisonment as an expression of justice, but merely as bad luck; as Pablo's mistress puts it:

"...un año antes de la desgracia de Pablo. Porque convénsase que esas cosas son un momento desgraciao. Un momento de muy mala suerte que mata a un hombre pa'toita la vida."(32)

These individuals do not consider that there could be any other possible cause for their destiny. This attitude prevents them from arriving at a different perception of their problems; as a result, they become victims without even recognizing their state for what it is. In prison, for instance, Julian, who is there because of the murder of Pedro, never analyses what happened; he spends all his time dreaming about the future. Once in the city, he thinks, he will be able to fulfil his ambition of rebuilding his life with a good job, affection, and amusements. However, once his sentence is completed and he reaches the city, his everyday life there swamps these expectations. The narrative of his post-prison experience carries the novel forward into its third phase: the city.

It is in the city that the characters' hopes are centred. However, for immigrants like Julian, the first impression on arriving there is far more negative:

"... nadie ve a Julian. ¿Es que no va a encontrar ningún conocido de antes? ¿No va a tener delante ninguna cara amiga? ¿Van a ser todos los días uno tras otro como el de hoy? ¿Vacíos y tranquilos? Nadie... la gente pasaba indiferente a su lado. Ningún rostro brillaba de alegría, de buen cariño.(33)

Confusion and loneliness make the lives of people like Julian even harder. They have come to the city looking for an improvement in their conditions but, far from that, they now have to face situations for which they are not prepared. All their energies are consumed in a struggle for survival. The salient characteristic of

these people is their lack of skills. Their existence can be characterized in one word: instability - for they never become completely adapted to the new reality of the city life, but constantly long for days gone by, and for times they spent back in their home town. They, therefore, remain unsettled, moving spasmodically from one situation to another, but forever unable to satisfy their needs; indeed, new needs constantly arise for them. Usually, they become absorbed into the floating mass of the unskilled population - those who, always moving from job to job - form the marginal population of large cities.

In these three phases of the novel, Meneses presents his interpretation of the problems of the urban immigrant; he defines it intuitively in terms of their impotence to modify their own destiny. The contrast between existence in the countryside and existence in the city only serves to confirm that these people, wherever they go, can do nothing but struggle hopelessly. The idea acquires an additional dimension of irony from the fact that Meneses presents his characters as unaware of their foredoomed condition. These men and women actually expect to change their living conditions; they dream of such changes while still living their small, nameless home town. Their dream establishes the contrast between the village and the city, which they envisage as the goal which will fulfil their longings. Julian, for instance:

"...cuando el pueblo lo agobia
demasiado abraza a Gregoria, y le
dice que se irá para Caracas donde
él trabajará duro, donde él ganará

real pa'alante"(34)

However, Julián does not know that human destiny assumes more complex and oppressive forms, or that his hope is already doomed to failure. This fatality can be represented ironically, for example, when Julián is finally sentenced to go to prison, and Gregoria - initially on her way to see him - meets somebody else and forgets about Julián altogether:

- "¿Nos vamo, Gregoria?

- Amonó

Frente a la torre blanca, se santiguó. Felipe la suspendió en sus brazos para ayudarla a subir. Luego salto él también.

Dame un puestico a tu lao. Poque hase mucho caló y estoy un poco cansao.

Se lo cantó en la oreja sonriéndole tranquilo. Ella se le tiró en los brazos.

¡Arre, macho!

Por el camino fue el amor. Conoció Felipe de nuevo el cuerpo de aquella mujer.

-¿Ve, que eres igualita a enantes?

Ella dijo:

- Yo, me quedo contigo en Caracas.

Y así fue, por el camino a Baruta, antes de entrar a la carretera blanca."(35)

Inexorably, life is turned away from its original course, and man is lost in the maze of delusions and new experiences. Later, the same story is to be repeated when Julián meets Rosa, who is destined to be abandoned in her turn. From memories of the remote past, the same story emerges: a man, or woman, a hope, a death, a new encounter, an abandonment, and back to the beginning again - a pattern of repetitions, like the verses of a song. Meanwhile, man is

subordinated to a condition which he cannot understand and, in these circumstances, fights to overcome what appears to be an inherent feature of his human condition: the impossibility of self-realization. Unconsciously, these people become involved in a circle of anxiety whose outstanding manifestation is their incapability to settle down.

This approach in depth to the social phenomenon of rural migration places Meneses quite apart from the writers of his generation; he is the first in focussing the city from that angle. Here Meneses poses the problem of the rural migrant, who enters the urban world unprepared and innocent. Yet, though he raises the issue, he steps back from any consideration of the specific socio-psychological problems involved. On the contrary, he locates that problem within a more general metaphysical statement about human destiny - of which this is one more manifestation. It is the metaphysical perspective of his work which defines his distinctiveness even at this stage. Meneses reinforces this perspective through his deployment of the narrative voice, his choice of language and the organization of his work.

Canción de Negros is narrated in the third person and the past tense throughout, but the effect of this is not to increase our sense of distance from the actions narrated. Rather, the narrator's freedom to impose his own understanding of events is exploited to bring us closer to them. The timing of what has occurred in the past is allowed to remain vague; the important feature of the organization of the narrative is thus not the passage of "objective" time, but the

narrator's ordering of the material in these sections. Thus the lives of the characters are perceived in terms of a series of displacements, from village to prison; from prison to city. Similarly, the book's descriptive passages, though their point of departure purports to be the direct transposition of reality, soon merge into the kind of explanation which only an all-knowing narrator can offer. This can be observed in the opening scene:

" - ¡Aaaahhh!
Extendió las piernas, alzó los
brazos fuertes y bostezó cansado:
tenía ganas de comer!..."(36)

The onomatopoeia of the yawn is amplified in a visual image where sound and movement carry the imaginative projection of the scene; finally, the narrator's explanation is disclosed: the man is tired and hungry. This single example illustrates the type of command of the situation which the narrator assumes. He is in possession not only of the external facts of each situation, but the inner life of the characters which allows him, at will, to reveal the explanation of what is going on. And if hunger is a trivial example, others go deeper:

"Entre el verde oscuro de un
bosquecillo, saltan las manchas
blancas de las casitas del pueblo,
como una costumbre. En cambio
Julián siente, como hervir de
gusanos, mil pequeños sentimientos
que lo envenenan de rabia y le dan
temblor y malestar en la piel
morena.

¿Qué desea en ese momento?

Ante sí mira el cuerpo destrozado
de Pedro.

¡Maldito sea! ¡hay que enseñarle
como se debe tratar a los machos!
Julián Ponce no mira otra cosa. No
desea mirar otra cosa.

¡MALDITO SEEEAAAAA!!!"(37)

The intimacy with which Julián's inner life is presented is reinforced by the narrator's habit of presenting material circumstances through Julian's own perceptions: "saltan las manchas blancas de las casitas del pueblo, como una costumbre..."; "Ante si mira el cuerpo destrozado de Pedro."

Language is another aspect of particular importance because it involves an exploration of the negroes' mode of expression. Their characteristic utterances endow language with different tones and a different musicality. At times, attention seems to be directed to the purely acoustic qualities of black speech:

"- ¿Cómo ta, m'hijo?
- Bueno, taita ...
- Levántese que ya es tarde.
- Ajá, bueno. Váyase pue,
pa'levantame
- ¿Y qué jué? ¿No se pué levanta
alante mío?
- Lo do somo macho...
- Ya voy, pué."(38)

The main feature here is the rhythmic pattern of the expression used. Much of the expressive richness derives from this, through omissions: "¿No se pué levanta alante mío?". Elisions: "¿Cómo ta m'hijo?". Corruptions: "No. A la noche mejón"; also help to establish the speaker's idiolect. By contrast with written language, the speech of the blacks recognizes no constraining norms; instead,

it tends towards creativity in its adaptation to the circumstances. The variety of this speech can be seen when it is contrasted with the interventions of the narrator:

"Miguel siguió la calle, empedrada y con vueltas, hasta la cárcel. Al llegar a la puerta, paró los pasos ante el Coronel: ¿me va a necesitar esta noche?

- No, mi vale.
- Entonces, voy a llegar si acaso a la madrugada.
- ¿La mujesita del tersio aquel?

Y sin darle tiempo a la respuesta:

- Tenga cuidado, ¿sabe? Con mujé ajena no se meta. Siga consejo, ¿sabe?

- Si ella tiene amo, e poque quiere. Pue que cambie de opinión. Mientras tanto, necesita que la ayuden y aquí toy yo."(39)

Parallel to the negroes' speech is the narrator whose language retains qualities of simplicity and precision:

"En la atmósfera del pueblo hay amargos símbolos.
Suenan a veces, en el vientre oscuro de las noches, zumbidos de algún joropo lejano. Rezonga el furrucu. Puntea el cuatro. Brincan las maracas. Pero en los oídos del pueblo, llora el joropo alegre. Los viejos miran los rosarios en cada caravana de hormigas. Todos los palos forman cruces en el suelo. Las hojas caen como lágrimas en el aire enneblinado."(40)

Each image is rich in suggestions, but the overall effect is one

of sobriety. The statements are brief and direct. In the very first sentence, for instance - "En la atmósfera del pueblo hay amargos símbolos" - there is the idea of something painful, but it is merely affirmed, not explained. The narrator then proceeds to name the "amargos simbolos", concluding with an expression which sums up the original proposition in an image which conveys the highest expression of sorrow: "Llora el joropo alegre." Since "el joropo" after all, is the rhythm which expresses the liveliest connotation of joy, if it cries there cannot possibly be more sadness. This last affirmation prepares for the superstitious vision of natural elements which follow: "...miran rosarios en cada caravana de hormigas" and "todos los palos forman cruces en el suelo" and "las hojas caen como lágrimas en el aire enneblinado" carry the latent suggestion of imminent death.

The apparent simplicity of Meneses' narrative conceals a great deal of unobtrusive versatility. Consider, for example, the contrasting pace of the description of the funeral of Ana Dolores:

"En la tarde, los hombres llevaron la urna a un descampado, a la vera de Camino Grande. Así es el cementerio de los pueblos pequeños: un montón de piedras y una cruz clavada. Los campesinos, al pasar delante, se quitan el sombrero y, apresurando el paso, rezan en recuerdo de Ana."(42)

and the account of the combat between Julián and Pedro:

"De repente el grito:
- ¡Párese, gran ajo!
Y el otro grito que ilumina la
conciencia: el viejo está
muerto."(43)

In the first case, the situation evolves in slow motion, as if a lens were moving slowly across a picture; in the second, the situation is expressed far more dynamically in just three strokes. In both cases the situations are handled with a remarkable economy of language. Yet, nothing is missing in the exposition; each narrative statement both speaks for itself and invites the reader to fill any gaps from his or her own experience. Thus Meneses is able to suggest a situation without necessarily having to explain it. The apparently fragmented structure of the work owes much to this technique of "description by implication."

The organization of the plot in Canción de Negros has been conceived to reflect the character's itinerant nature. Just as they respond to their random existence, so the plot is deployed to create a similar impression of transience. The basis of this division into the three sections already mentioned - El Pueblo, La Cárcel, La Ciudad. This division in itself is a reminder that the story concerns the displacement of the characters from one to another of these places. This structure is supported by an infrastructure of short chapters, and events are represented through very brief and direct statements, as in the following examples:

"Y cambió de trabajo y de vida.
Ahora, de aquí para allá y de allá
para acá.
Cargador sempiternamente unido a un
camión de viajes, hasta Puerto

Cabello, hasta Barquisimeto, hasta
La Guaira.
Ahora, como antes, de aquí para
allá."

"Ni siquiera se despidió de aquel
blando amor de Juanita.
Hasta de ella huyó.
Una noche, esperó en vano el
blando cuerpo gordo.
Julían no llegó."(44)

"... Yo, a veces no me acuerdo de
ella
Era linda y se enamoró de un pobre
negro como yo.
Cuando la recuerdo me dan ganas de
irla a buscar; para que me bese.
Largote, como ella hacía.
Pero yo no la he visto nunca
después.
Porque ahí mismo yo seguí mi vidita
brincando de acá para allá y de
allá para acá.
Ella, seguro que anda todavía en su
automovilito. O quién sabe si se
casó."(45)

No long reflections are made upon the facts; they are simple
presented. Occasionally the narrator slips in some explanation:

"Julían calla sonriendo.
"Era rubia y se enamoró de mí que
soy un pobre negro...! El tono
jactancioso quita toda la humildad
a la frase. El, calla mirando a
Gregoria."(46)

Briefly, the plot is built up according to the rhythm imposed by
the characters' personal destiny, that is to say, spasmodically.
Hence the various stories, and the apparently different directions in

which they are developed. Pedro, Julian and Gregoria each postulate their own uncertainty. They are directionless; they merely go through an existence which gives them no defined goal to follow, nor even any meaning to justify their lives. So the facts are assumed as being inevitable. It is this aspect which Meneses attempts to transmit, as he presents the hazardous course taken by events. Pedro's death is followed by Gregoria's flight with Julian, and later by Julián's imprisonment, and Gregoria's new flight in response to the command of her instincts. This episode opens up new plot possibilities which are merely suggested to the reader's imagination, not developed at length. Instead, the author's strategy directs our attention to another story: Julian's life in prison. This new focus enriches the plot by displaying a new range of hazards. These are independent of one another; yet at the same time, they are correlated in a sort of counterpoint, in which the same note is repeated time and time again in a different register. Yet the voices which contribute to this counterpoint have something in common: they are all dark voices, those of mulattos, 'mestizo' and negroes. Meanwhile, as the work goes on, it becomes progressively more complicated in structure in each successive phase. In the first part the characters were linked together in simple combinations: Pedro related to Dolores, or to Gregoria, or to Julián. Afterwards, for a time, Julián outweighs the other characters in importance. But in the third section it seems as if the individual as such loses importance, as he or she becomes integrated into the social group. This effect is achieved by presenting several different perspectives, which somehow establish a balanced image of the situations portrayed.

The city section is one which presents a more critical and committed view, because it reveals something like the full complexity implied in the process of adaptation to that hostile reality. The solid world of the peasant has been left behind, and the present is dominated by this disarticulated reality whose development drives towards its own dissolution. Back in the home town there was at least some sort of identity with the environment: nature, familiar faces. In the city all is different: there is no identity any longer; only a growing feeling of confusion. The crowd, the succession of precarious employments, everything, in short, tends to increase the feeling of dissolution. And Meneses ratifies this pattern in his characters' behaviour by presenting this last image of Julian:

"Después de unos días se fue.
Y así volvía, de año en año, a ver
a sus nuevos hijos.
Hasta que un año volvió..."(47)

This open ending merely confirms that there is nothing that can tie Julian down. His rootlessness takes him far beyond any family commitment, or any other bond, because Julian is lost even for himself; indeed, he does not even know it.

In these three early works the exploratory nature of Meneses' writing can be clearly seen. These two short stories and the novel,

each illustrates a different aesthetic, as well as a diversity of themes.

In Adolescencia, the stress is placed upon the psychological. And the conflictive nature of the process which is taking place in the character's innermost being is outlined. The dominant feature is the feeling of anguish that prevails in Julio Folgar's soul in adjusting himself to the new developments. It is mediated through a set of values which reveal Julio's type of motivations, which determine that very fact that his transition to adolescence of itself constitutes a source of conflict. The device of the mirror enables Julio to play with his image and, to envisage through it the imagery which is going to be the source of his understanding of reality and of himself. The reference to cinema is of outstanding importance too because it, on the one hand, reinforces the image of the mirror as a vehicle of self-knowledge reflection and, on the other, is a resource Meneses uses to underline his updated consciousness about his world.

La balandra Isabel llegó esta tarde, brings to us a theme of popular character; it is a portrait of seafaring folk, though with some elements of a land-based reality, in particular the treatment of witchcraft and magic. The characters are largely passive creatures of their own determining circumstances and the maritime background serves Meneses as a further image of the neutrality of Man's fate. The author handles the short story form with considerable skill aiming at, and largely achieving, an effect of symmetry, a just

balance between form and content.

Canción de Negros takes up the figure of the rural individual and projects him to the collective perspective of his group; the characters are depicted as subordinate to their peasant condition, and involved in the common struggle for survival. They are presented in the actions of their everyday lives through which there emerges a close view of their attitudes and of their psychology in general. The form chosen to express these men's lives has much in common with the recurrent structure of a song, and this is apt since together with their poverty these immigrants take with them to the city the rhythm of their music. It is also the rhythm of their sufferings because for them the situation is like the repetition of a song- it never changes.

These works propose three different profiles that allow Meneses to develop the intuitions each one of them evokes for him. From now on each work is to become a new step in that assault on Man and on form in which Meneses is engaged. People from the city, seafaring folks and negroes encourage Meneses to further explorations whose discoveries are displayed in new works. Borrachera and Campeones, respectively a short story and a novel, continue Meneses' production, and provide the material for the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

VARIANTS OF DEFEAT

BORRACHERA (1936)

It is a story that concentrates on the effect which drunkenness can have on a human being, in this case, the poor black Antonio. The story develops against the background of a long-term sociological process: the migration of people from the countryside into the urban areas seeking to improve their condition of life but finding instead extreme conditions of deprivation and conflicts. This story illustrates such a process.

The leading motive developed in the story is a kind of hallucination suffered by Antonio under a condition of alcoholic intoxication. One Sunday evening, sitting at the bar, Antonio drinks his "berro" until he loses all conscious control of his actions. His awareness of present time does not go beyond his glass of "berro" and his memories take the form of an explosion of multiple images somehow retrieved from his past. This ebb and flow taking place in his mind repeats itself unremittingly with painful insistence on the unfulfilled hope of a better life:

"Y dijo Juan de Dios, el hijo del arriero: En Caracas es muy bueno, mi hermano. Yo me voy. Quiero conocer un pedazo de tierra mejor que éste."(1)

In Caracas, however, things are not as good as expected. All that Antonio has encountered there has been a devastating loneliness

and the urge to drink, which now drags him away from the harsh reality plunging him into acute delirium, a nightmare which evokes all the various forms of misery that life has become for him. There are no longer any hopes for Antonio but the daily confirmation of his frustration through the constant presence of anxiety and loneliness. Thus, the afternoon and evening of any Sunday in the life of Antonio fits into the pattern registered in the following passage:

" - Otro berro, Diego.
Ahora Antonio color de tierra
trabaja en el almacén de Pérez
López. Está sucio, roto y cansado
en la noche nublada de domingo.
Durmió un poco en la tarde pero
está sucio, roto y cansado"(2)

In his search to abate the loneliness Antonio has resorted to alcohol; afterwards he would look for sex, but neither of these would bring about the cure to his solitude. The false remedies he seeks, if they do anything, reinforce the impossibility of achieving even the most basic form of communication. During his drinking bouts the feeling of depression leads Antonio to the extreme condition of total alienation. And as for sex, instead of the joy and pleasure he seeks he meets with strong feelings of disgust.

The contrast between the present time and memories of the past is marked by a children's song which, in the confused mind of Antonio, transforms itself into a terrible threat:

"Antonio retoño
mató a su mujer
con un cuchillito
del tamaño de él.
Le sacó las tripas,
las puso a vender..."(3)

Insistently, the words sung by Antonio's mother in his childhood, come to preside over the nightmarish dance whose flow of images reveals the repressed violence of Antonio's psyche. The hunger of his unsatisfied desires bursts out translated into an urgent demand: "QUIERO, QUIERO". The words give expression to the forceful, residual instinct which is now the last thing keeping him alive.

Antonio blends past and present together in his glass of "berro" and during lapses of half-consciousness his feeling of failure hammers his mind time and time again:

" ¿Quién ha dicho ahora, allí junto al negro sucio, esas palabras locas? Años y años pasan y echan sobre las cosas una niebla.

...
" ¿Quién - caray! - está diciendo cosas vagas que nadie sabe si son esto o lo otro? Hay viento hoy en Caracas. Tomarse un berro no es más que sorberse un traguito caliente. Después... El negro pobre tiene encima cansancio y miseria; dice cosas, oye cosas y se forma dentro de él una voz que piensa.
- Quiero berro, Dieguito.

¿Qué has dicho, Diego? ¿Qué ha dicho? ah? ... ¿que es tarde? Bueno. Tarde, sueño, cansancio. Cansancio de años que pusieron miseria sobre el, que velaron las cosas, que ..."(4)

Failure and his subordination to that failure deprive the character of any possible redemption. Overwhelmed by fatigue, he gets through his unchanging succession of miseries without conceiving any possible change which would save him from disintegration.

The external structure of the story itself conveys the sense of disintegration which is implicit in the theme. The tale is divided into three parts, identified simply as A, B and C. This forms a kind of triptych displaying a variety of images of Antonio during his crisis of drunkenness.

Among the resources employed by Meneses to emphasize the monotonous rhythm of the crisis - as well as the magnitude of Antonio's needs - repetition carries an especially evocative power to recreate the hallucinations of the protagonist.

"Otro berro, Diego.
... Otro berro, Diego.
... Otro berro, Dieguito
... Quiero, Quiero.
... Quiero, Quiero."(5)

Endless repetitions and enumeration are forms which depict and reproduce the intensity of inner processes taking place in Antonio's febrile mind. Stress is added to the situation to increase the tension even further by resorting to key words in isolation to produce the sort of spasmodic rhythm illustrated in this example:

"... Mira. Epa! Años y años
Noches y noches. Miseria,
cansancio.
El aguardiente es un traguito.
Mira, Diego, yo ...
Angustia, miseria, cansancio.
La madre - hace mucho tiempo -
cantaba:

Antonio Retoño
mató a su mujer..."(6)

Through repetition a word can grow full of suggestion to a point where its unexpected force may even break through and affect the

action originally implied. This happens most notably with the formula "Quiero - Quiero":

"Quiero, quiero
La palabra oscura y vibrante
le corría caminos oscuros de su
cabeza chata, pobre.

Quiero, quiero
La palabra simple, oscura,
brillante, se hundía con pasos de
angustia en los caminos de su
pensamiento."(7)

"Quiero, Quiero" is at first only a desire shaped in words that somehow have become lodged in Antonio's mind. The second "quiero, quiero" is still a simple and straightforward expression but now loaded with contradiction for it is "oscura, brillante" and carries a strong feeling of anguish.

"Quiero, Quiero
Era ansia ductil y pesada
que empujaba ahí, dentro de su
hondura; un ansia de tic-tac
espeso; un quiero-quiero
gigantesco, baboso, que le apretaba
su cabeza chata de pobre."(8)

Now there has been a displacement: the formula is now internalized. Its nature has changed; it is no longer word but obsession. There is now a connotation of Time as something "gigantesco, baboso..." which is there, beating in Antonio's brain.

"Quiero, Quiero
Le mandaba la palabra
- Ella - la palabra, el
quieroquiero -
mandándolo con su dedo extendido
haciéndole decir su
quieroquiero..."(9)

A further evolution has taken place, a distance has been marked and "quieroquiero" has become autonomous, detached. It does not belong to Antonio's utterings or perceptions any longer. Instead, it becomes his master. This displacement increases the tension turning the situation into a crisis.

"Quiero, Quiero
Lo está quemando la palabra.
No: lo zarandea, lo remueve
a él que se llama Antonio" (10)

In total possession of Antonio's mind, "quiero, quiero" imposes its own independence, making its own demands, turning man into a mere object, or rather a label. The word overpowers the man. This can be possible by virtue of this game of inversions. By means of a series of displacements the word enriches its meaning to the extent of altering its original role and superimposing itself on the man who uses it. But, side by side with the repetition, we have an opposite kind of verbal effect in Meneses' rich use of imagery:

"Andaba lento, echaba sus pasos
bajo la ceniza fría del cielo
lluvioso, podrido, revuelto de
claridades metálicas y de nubes
gordas, flojas, llenas de un negro
fofo." (11)

If the "quiero quiero" passages reinforce the weight of the word in itself, and the consequent loss of reality on Antonio's part, here the words are developed to quite another purpose, as the images build into a picture of the very texture and quality of Antonio's wandering.

Antonio, the poor negro, has got only misery and loneliness in Caracas; reality has shattered his dreams and his only comfort is

provided by old memories from a distant home village, by the figure of his mother which can bring a bit of tenderness to his life in solitude.

Theme, language and form in this story open a new ground for reflection in Meneses' way of focussing his reality. Antonio, the poor negro, is no longer a peasant but a modern labourer; he comes to confirm what has already been suggested in Canción de Negros: the features of instability and misery prevailing in the lives of these migrants. This is stressed even further by the desire for escape and the final defeat is marked by the remoteness between his current life and the distant memories of his home town.

CAMPEONES (1939)

Campeones is a novel concerning four main characters for whom life is a cruel failure. The characters are a paradigm of marginal groups whose life is permeated by deprivation and ignorance.

The work traces the characters' lives from childhood to maturity, viewing such development as a long process of apprenticeship. The story begins at the time when the characters' youthful dreams were still intact, when life was thought of as something for the future whereas the present was nothing but the enactment of each day's adventures which provide the sources for their dreams of hope and success. Their four lives, brought up within the same frame, but each bearing its own individual psychology, will offer different facets of the same fact: human

existence envisaged as failure.

The novel is an exploration of Man's failure in confronting life. This can be approached from two perspectives. One of them presents Man fighting against the odds to resist the unjustly-ordered world which threatens to subdue him. A second approach presents Mas as subjected to inscrutable designs which condemn him to inevitable failure, whatever the nature of his project. In this latter case, society does not come into consideration, and Man is to be regarded as a doomed being whatever the circumstances. Campeones reaches its end leaving the choice between these two visions as an open ambiguity, something which is destined to be a characteristic feature in Meneses' narrative.

In its general structure, Campeones is plotted as the story of an apprenticeship. It presents life as a process whose ultimate outcome is that the characters become acquainted with the brutal fact of failure. The story covers two vital stages in the existence of the characters. Their childhood is spent in close contact with nature; the boys exist in a state of innocence; life for them is nothing but a primeval force. Later youth, by contrast, is viewed as the unfolding of the boys' experiments in coming to terms with the society to which they belong.

At the beginning, the boys are innocent and uncomplicated; all that they know about is playing games, swimming and running. The communion between them and nature is so complete that they are just

one more natural element in the landscape.

"... Eran como una rama de tres hojas nuevas que la brisa del mar arrastraba sobre la fiebre ardiente de las playas guaireñas. Como una rama de tres hojas, limpia, brillante: Teodoro Guillén, Luciano Guánchez y Jose Luis Monzón." (12)

Freshness and loyalty will be the central elements of their friendship as well as the point of departure for the story. In this first presentation of them, the characters are introduced as a monolithic group, sharing all the things important to childhood: friendship, games, hideouts:

"La Playita fue el lazo que más los unió. Tendidos en su arena vieron madurar muchas mañanas; luchando o descansando de las peleas, vieron desde 'La Playita' el lento desmayo de los muchos atardeceres sobre el inmenso mar manchado de velas y barcas." (13)

The element which will bring a change to the simplicity of these youthful souls is, quite simply, the passage of time. The natural flow of life leads to new and decisive developments and what had been a delightful comradeship begins to come apart. The arrival of puberty brings about a state of introspection in which the boys attempt to understand what is happening to them.

"Lenta, silenciosamente, con pasos de sombra, la brillante aspereza de la angustia profunda avanzaba dentro de los muchachos..."

El huésped de los oscuros pasos no
se detiene: su empuje dulce se
desliza en lo hondo del cuerpo,
corre bajo la carne, se extiende
por toda la red de los
nervios."(14)

From now onwards their attitude begins to shift. The first sign is the weakening of their integrity as a group. The incorporation of Ramon Camacho into the group is a breakthrough which reveals that they are not invincible any longer. Ramon Camacho has to be accepted because he has demonstrated his right to be one of them:

"Cumplía todas las pruebas con una serena agresividad hasta que el grupo de muchachos no pudo oponerse más y Luciano, alegremente le dijo que iban a llevarlo a La Playita. ... Así fue como se clavó en el grupo del arisco Teodoro Guillén, del tristón Luciano Guánchez, de Jose Luis Monzón, el adormilado, este Camacho, recio, oscuro, decidido. Entró tal vez por su decidida voluntad. Tal vez porque la adolescencia iba destruyendo el grupo infantil"(15)

Adolescence brings with it the rise of sexuality, which is the decisive step from childhood to youth. Awareness of sensual stimuli and the vital explosion of eroticism enhance the richness of the process in the boys. Together with it, there comes a demand for the fulfilment of new needs. As a result, existence becomes a

confrontation with the commitments imposed by the new situation.

"Las manos deseosas se alargan hacia los frutos de la vida, hacia los goces del mundo que exige dinero para poder decir 'sí'. Ya se acabó la edad inocente, hay que buscar dinero."(16)

The first of these needs is for sex. But this is accompanied by the character's individual ambitions as with the onset of adolescence, each member of the group begins to follow his own motivations, and to seek to become integrated with the social processes going on around him. The human environment has now the same kind of importance for them as the natural environment had before. The first sign of rupture appears when Teodoro and Jose Luis are invited to join the local baseball team, but Luciano Guánchez and Ramon Camacho are left out. This marks the beginning of their independent life. Afterwards, Luciano begins working as a bricklayer and Ramon Camacho devotes himself to boxing. Each one, in his own way, attempts to achieve something. But future developments will demonstrate that these efforts are only stages on the road to failure. In the end, none of them is able to achieve anything; they all seem to follow a doomed path already destined for them, as if their steps were predestined from the beginning. So, there are cases like Jose Luis, for instance, who appears to be even biologically predestined:

"Jose Luis comenzó a buscar quien le brindara vasitos de ron. Su padre había muerto una noche de borrachera ... y, José Luis... heredaba quizá el gusto por la

ardiente locura del licor."(17)

He is the first of the group to go downhill; his drinking habit crucially hinders his otherwise credible hopes of success; increasingly too, it takes him away from life. Teodoro is also going to follow the path laid down for him in adolescence and, although his end is not explicitly presented, it becomes easy to forecast, because from an early age

"...Teodoro miraba largo rato con mirada ansiosa el tongoneo de las morenas de curvas altaneras y de las blancas gordas y temblonas. A veces como si cumpliera un deseo irrefrenable, se juntaba con los más viciosos del pueblo y reía y buscaba los placeres que antes nunca pidió."(18)

Although the future brings success for Teodoro, it remains ephemeral because he does not have the strength of character to persevere in having a healthy sportsman's discipline. On the contrary, he tends to sink deeper into corruption. His name is even at that point mentioned with enthusiasm in baseball circles. However this does not last long because, like José Luis, Teodoro is unable to overcome his weakness for sex and alcohol. So, during a performance, his sister Purita Guillén, becomes aware of what the public and the critics think about his brother:

"Al lado de Purita y Luciano, gentes extrañas hablaban: decían que ya era sabido, desde hacía mucho tiempo que Teodoro no daba más en su puesto de pitcher, que vivía borracho, que la sífilis lo estaba matando. Un doctorcito joven - anteojos,

bastón, tirolés ladeado - afirmó: -
Le duele el brazo. Fíjense que no
puede lanzar con el brazo estirado;

...

- Es la sífilis - decía el doctor -
sífilis muscular. ¡Fíjense!
¡fíjense! no le da el brazo para
más: no sirve. Otro buen jugador
que se pierde. Aguardiente y
mujeres, eso es lo que saben; no se
cuidan no sirven para nada."(19)

This is all that Teodoro can achieve. His sudden triumph only serves to precipitate his fall. Thus, his life evolves in a chaotic pattern that drags him to decline and delinquency. As for the other two, Luciano Guánchez and Ramón Camacho, they fare a little better. The former limits his dreams to the modest ambition of gaining Pura's love and working for her. But, though he partially succeeds in this, he too turns out a failure because, as Judith Gerendas observes:

"No hay lucha por conseguir el amor deseado, sólo un ansia infinita de goce. Una vez conseguida la mujer, no habrá en Luciano constancia ni esfuerzo para conservar ese amor y aumentarlo. Solamente después que se ha perdido lo ya logrado, surgirá una nueva ansia de posesión."(20)

There seems to be no way out for these existences; defeat in one form or another seems to be looming constantly for all of them in the form of death, vice or exhaustion in any of its forms. This is even the case with Ramón Camacho, though he might appear to have attained some success:

"... Ramón Camacho triunfa poniendo en sus puños aquella recia voluntad

que siempre tuvo."(21)

Yet, in spite of the fact that he does achieve professional success, such success is questionable on other levels. It means a decrease in his personal integrity, in the sense that he becomes subordinated to his managers and, worse still, he fails to help his friend when asked. Camacho, in his desire to become accepted in a world which is not his own, trades his dignity for a servility to others, which also implies a willingness to abandon his friends if that seems to be called for. As Judith Gerendas has pointed out:

"Ramón Camacho, es quizá la figura más trágica. Tiene voluntad y objetivos y fuerza para seguirlos ... (es el caso) más trágico porque logró lo que quiso, lo logró solo y, a pesar de ello y sin saberlo, no es más que un instrumento, cosa, títere. Traiciona la amistad, la solidaridad humana, en contra de su voluntad. También es campeón de mentiras como los otros."(22)

This confirms the paradox that even if such a character triumphs, they must still fail. They are from the beginning incapable of real achievement, there will always be some facet of their success which annuls or neutralizes all the rest. It is highly significant that Camacho's chosen field of action is boxing, the most brutal of all sports. Therefore, we can assume that Camacho's history embodies the most ironic contradiction: the greater his success, the more serious his fall will be.

The narrative of Campeones is a third person account related

after the events in the novel have taken place:

"Se escogieron como compañeros, se apartaron de los otros muchachos maiquetieños y, desde el punto de sus diez años, vivieron en un perenne empujón vital, libre y solitario."(23)

It is the most purely conventional form of narration, but no less sophisticated for that. It can move from particular remembered images to a broader definition of the context of events:

"Prefirieron la caliente pasión de las playas al bochorno apacible de la siesta del pueblo. Sucios, altaneros, violentos, abandonaron casa y escuela para zumbarse en el ímpetu bravío de una vida salvaje sin norma paternal ni cariños familiares."(24)

Having created a suitable atmosphere by resorting to all these means, the narrator will discreetly introduce fresh details to complete the composition of his picture. The scene set, the leisurely introduction is interrupted and counterpointed by a dramatized incident, after which we return to the descriptive mode once more.

"Hay que jugar 'ladrón y policía' entre las dunas de arena blanca que estiran sus lomos antes de Catia de La Mar, porque es sabroso arrastrarse acostados sobre la arena caliente y abalanzarse de pronto sobre el compañero que se había escondido tras un montón de cardones.

- ¡Uno, dos y tres! Usted está preso y no vale librado.
- Mira, mi hermano: huellas de

lagarto. Fíjate. Entre la marca de las patas la rayita que deja el rabo.

- Vamos a cazarlo.

- ¿No estas viendo que está metido en aquel cardonal? Mira donde se acaba la huella.

La brisa del mar rueda entre las dunas y hay en ellas un olor de algas morenas, profundo, hondo, como si corrieran en el aire invisibles montones de algas arrastradas por la brisa caliente entre la luz llameante del sol que atraviesa el cristal del aire con su vivo calor."(25)

The outstanding feature of Meneses' language in this book is his use of both colloquial and cultivated registers, lending variety to the composition and setting up a rhythm of contrast within the work. The cultivated forms are characteristic of the narrator; their function above all, is to carry his own sense of values into the story without overt judgment having to be passed:

"Algún dios los protegía. Un buen dios indio, a quien amaran las gentes de los caciques - dios moreno y sentimental - o un alocado dios inocente de los negros esclavos, ejercía tutela sobre el grupo simple de los muchachos altaneros."(26)

This is a strongly evaluative language, controlling the reader's responses in some detail. For instance, in the parenthesis qualifying the characteristics of the "buen dios indio", such judgment hints at the narrator's own sympathetic attitude towards his subject-matter - the native people and their beliefs. But the

handling of sensory effects can be another instrument of authorial control, for instance, to express an emotive state:

"Sí: un retazo de luna le bailó en el vestido. Todo el Universo, las manchas difusas de las vías celestes, los oscuros abismos marinos, las yerbas y los árboles y la aspera piel de la tierra danzan con el miedoso afán que mueve el destino de Luciano Guánchez, que ya está decidido a reventar su angustia."(27)

Meneses also employs the technique of construction by accumulation introducing parallel statements one after another to enrich the description. This can be observed in the following passage:

"Tibia la noche en Maiquetía. Suave, lenta, perezosa la brisa muda en sus giros por la plaza en penumbra y, entre sus dedos delgados de aire, húmedos de olor caliente y lejano del mar, arrastra las hojas caídas, las levanta y hace que describan en círculos vagos su danza imprecisa."(28)

The single sentence "Tibia la noche en Maiquetía" stands in contrast with the accumulative rhythm of the following sentence in which a wide variety of different impressions is used to build up the multi-dimensional picture of the night.

The other level of language is the colloquial. Such is the register used by the characters themselves. It is through their use of it that they are most intimately known. In their case, the suffixes put to most expressive use are the diminutive series. These

are extremely common in their utterances. They can be used to express either contempt or affection. Here is an instance of a pejorative usage:

"Está bien - dijo - está bien,
machito, ladrón, campeón de
tontos"(29)

and here

"Y mientras come sigue pensando que
cometió una tontería. Pero, ¡Caray!
Sí ¡el doctorcito le dijo
ladrón!(30)

Whereas in the following examples the dominant note is one of affection:

"No es mejor de palabra Camachito?
... Es que ¿sabes? Tengo que
llevar mis cuentas claras. Si no,
se me acaban las puyitas"(31)

"¡Pura, Pura, Pura...! ¡Si es que
el nombre de la hembra lo tiene
clavado como los ganados el hierro
del amo!... ¡Ah! muchachita para
saber amarrarlo."(32)

Other colloquial expressions represent particular moments in the speech of the locality; they may even, as in the cases that follow, refer to one particular situation, so that the expression belongs to an almost personal code.

"- Mi hermano...
- Qué me ves tanto Teodoro
- Me está pareciendo que estás
vitoqueado
- ¿Vitoqueado de qué?"

"Bueno, mientras lo engatusaba enseñándole una sortija, Teodoro le iba sacando el reloj con la otra mano."(33)

Campeones also registers the incorporation of Anglicisms into the colloquial speech and reveals the penetration of this foreign element into popular consciousness. The assimilation occurs especially through sports. Baseball is the bridge between the two cultures and Campeones demonstrates several ways in which these new words are assimilated. What is involved may be a simple imitation of sounds, as when Teodoro, leaving the bar, is addressed by the landlord:

" - Gur bai - dice el zambo
- Gur bai - dice Teodoro"(35)

Or, as it is the case with the following example, the words may be incorporated within Spanish vocabulary as genuinely new semantic items:

"El club guaireño Nueva York presentó este año dos jugadores nuevos: el outfielder Jose Luis Monzón y el pitcher Teodoro Guillén. Poco tenemos que decir con respecto a Monzón, bateador errático, fildeador medio que pasara por el base ball venezolano como tantos otros."(36)

Throughout these colloquial expressions Meneses achieves a more precise picture of the characters; it is a recourse that brings them closer to the reader, so the devastating evidence of their failure becomes even more pathetic.

The title of Campeones implies a concept that Meneses uses sarcastically - "champions of falsehood" as Judith Gerendas says. These characters confirm Meneses' intuition as to the tendency to failure of these marginal individuals who lack the strength to oppose their circumstance. If they do fight, then they must face life ill-prepared - so that they will invariably be defeated and their attempts to overcome destiny prove futile.

This conviction, however, drives Meneses to seek out and explain the causes of this phenomenon. Subsequent works presented a search for a possible identity (El Mestizo José Vargas), or search for sense, for an explanation for the fact of existence (as in El Duque, Destino Cumplido, etc.) which bring Meneses back to the theme after a 10-year silence.

CHAPTER IV

PERSONAL DESTINIES

EL DUQUE (1946)

El Duque tells the story of an unexpected encounter of Federico Montesdeoca, El Duque, with an old friend and the bitter reflections which it provokes.

Federico Montesdeoca is a bohemian whose way of life is process of self destruction. Montesdeoca, however, *was not always* like this, and it is just the memories of other times which the encounter with his friend has brought to the fore.

The portrait of Montesdeoca, in fact, presents him in a state of absolute self-neglect, as he himself realizes when caught in a bitter moment of reflection:

"Estoy sucio, raído. Despido un olor indescriptible en el cual se mezclan ráfagas de alcohol y afirmaciones de miseria. Podéis creer que, desde hace mucho tiempo, no tengo más dinero que el que obtengo de las dádivas de los viejos amigos. Eso es lo que me divierte en grado sumo. Me les acerco como si existiera la camaradería de antes.

- Un cigarrillo - digo

Ellos alargan apresuradamente el paquete de blancos tubitos llenos de rubio tabaco importado.

- Toma, duque.

Cogeré unos cuantos ¿sabes? No

tengo mucha plata en estos días.

Y les miro la cara.

Asustados como ratones indecisos, nerviosos, asqueados por mi decisión de acercármeles y ponerlos en contacto con la miseria. Yo sonrío y me les acerco más. Les echo en la cara el tufo insoportable de mis noches de borrachera.

- Un fósforo - pido -

- Toma, duque.

Sé que me desprecian y yo me divierto, porque conozco perfectamente la naturaleza de sus sentimientos. Si fueran valientes, si se decidieran a golpearme, a decirme injurias, a gritar que me odian, terminaría por fastidiarme el juego. Pero no; están bien educados, son corteses, creen - todavía - en el valor de la amistad, de la camaradería de la juventud. Son pequeños, endebles, miedosos. Me divierto asustándolos, sacándoles monedas."(1)

Federico Montesdeoca has lost every notion of dignity and self-esteem. His behaviour reveals an absolute lack of respect for all the values and norms of his social environment. This is an attitude which Montesdeoca has developed in response to the feeling of frustration that existence has imposed on him. The realization of life as irreversible succession of days that carries him inexorably to his death has persuaded him of the uselessness of any effort, or of any form of dignity, since, in any case, as he has learnt, Man will never be able to fulfil his expectations, whatever these may be.

This figure of the bohemian is used by Meneses to analyse the sense of frustration from a more intellectual perspective than he has adopted hitherto. From now onwards this type of character begins to be developed in Meneses' work reaching its most finished expression in the José Martínez of La Misa de Arlequín. This new approach to the matter is accompanied by an existential consideration of reality in which life is regarded as a predetermined destiny from which Man cannot escape. The character here is an educated individual who adopts his self-destructive attitude as a form of aggression; to reject what he has been granted by life. Such contemptuous behaviour as this implies a challenge, a form of self-affirmation. At least, it is his choice, if any choice is possible at all. So, he bitterly reminisces:

"Así me recuerdo: tendido sobre los diarios en busca de una señal, de una voz, de una palabra. Federico Montesdeoca pedía a la vida, esperaba de la vida, apasionadamente, la confirmación de que para él - huesudo hombrecillo a quien sus compañeros llamaban el duque - existía guardado en los misterios de la tierra, del aire, del mar, un destino maravilloso."(2)

This explains why Federico Montesdeoca disdainfully sets himself apart from any convention and rejects any kind of dignity. He feels defrauded; that is why he prefers, indeed, to forget about Federico Montesdeoca, the man. Instead, he allows El duque to take his place, because El duque is a disguise. It was the nickname his mother, Teresa Paiva - "soñadora aldeana, observadora de los atardeceres" -

had given him. Later on, however, the nickname becomes part of him, displacing the real self. Today Federico Montesdeoca remarks:

"...cuando pienso en Federico Montesdeoca, en aquel otro duquesito de diecisiete años, entristezco; es como si se repitiera en mí el hombrecito de entonces. Absurdo que yo pretenda tener guardada un alma de adolescente dentro de mí asqueante y podrido espíritu presente, pero ello es cierto. Siento cariño por mí mismo cuando me pongo a recordar mis años mozos."

....

"Ahora, el duque es un poco distinto. Se ha clavado en la boca una amarga sonrisilla. Apenas un gesto traza su hilo alargado a través de los años..."(3)

The duque of today is a drunkard who plunges ever further into degradation, because he is never content. He wants to exhaust the forms of self-mockery: it is in that spirit that he sings:

"Si alguna bala me hiriera
si una bala me matara
que contento yo estuviera..."(4)

Quite deliberately he mocks and provokes people by making a joke of his own abandoned state. Indeed, he would like to deceive even himself, but that is not possible. Not even the disguise of "duque" can provide safety, because it is swept away when his friend's voice calls his name again. To be called Federico, brings back the visions of life to which his juvenile self once clung, immersing him once

more in all that he has been trying to erase from his memory. It brings back what he calls "la vieja tragedia", meaning by that the passage of time and with it, the experience of repeated failures. His friend's voice negates the meaning of his choice, thus confirming Man's inability ever to command his own destiny, even by self negation.

El duque represents a characteristic Menesian stance in the face of reality; it implies that cynicism must be the outcome of a knowledge acquired from prolonged contact with daily life, or, as El duque says:

"En realidad, si tragedia hay es la
tragedia de todos los días.
La vieja tragedia."(5)

At this point it is not possible for Meneses to conceive that his character should react otherwise than with cynicism and wry sarcastic grimace, because for the time being, Meneses himself has not found any suitable recourse for getting through life unscathed.

The acceptance of frustration becomes a second nature to these characters. Thus, they perform, rather than live, whatever role seems to be their foredoomed destiny. This feature underlies Julio Miranda's comment on El duque and Un destino cumplido:

"Se trata de una frustración
asumida como un destino oscuro, al
fondo del cual parece reposar un
complejo edípico."(6)

Montesdeoca's concern with the maternal figure is an important aspect of his condition. This, indeed, is presented as a determining influence in his case ever since the very moment when he acquired his alternative name. "No sé desde cuando me llaman el duque" - soliloquizes the character - "Ha debido ser cosa de mi madre. Era ella de caracter melancólico y dada a las imaginaciones novelescas." And then, a little later, we learn: "Acaso las sentimentales actitudes de la madre, soñadora aldeana, observadora de los atardeceres, se repetía en el muchacho".(7) The attachment to the maternal image accompanies Montesdeoca at every stage. Thus, when his mother dies, the experience is internalized in a sort of inflexible secret sorrow.

"La muerte de mi madre produjo en Montesdeoca el colegial, en el duque del Liceo del Corazon de Jesus, un estado hiperestésico, exaltado, melancólico, tanto más fuerte cuanto que a nadie lo revelaba, cuanto que lo tenía reservado a la más estricta intimidad personal."(8)

It is that strong reaction which inclines Julio Miranda to think that the mother somehow is responsible for what happens to her son. So, he asserts:

"...la madre como atrayente abismo al cual se vuelve la mirada de los protagonistas, casi muriendo cuando ella muere, siendo atraídos por ella hacia la muerte, acercándosele en cada escalón que descienden en la ruina."(9)

If that is so, then there has been a change, the figure of the

protective mother has shifted her role to embody the idea of ~~Death-as-~~ mother; And, in this sense, we could think that underlined there is the image of Persephone with all the implications of the life-death circle. But Meneses seems rather sceptical in this regard, to judge by the theme of his next short story, which does not leave room for any hope: Un destino cumplido.

El duque is a story that opens a new perspective in Meneses' narrative - for Federico Montesdeoca is a new type of protagonist in his fiction - the Bohemian. Through him, Meneses takes up again - ten years on - the questions left unanswered in his early work. There, too, the city is presented as the context in which the characters will prepare and carry through their final attempt to become masters of their own destiny. Montesdeoca is not the ingenuous drunkard of Borrachera but an intellectual who rebels. It is precisely that rebellion that Meneses was to be concerned with in his subsequent work, where destiny is considered in terms of personal realization, as the protagonist comes to recognize his entrapment. Thus each story is a personal formula for rebellion.

EL MESTIZO JOSE VARGAS (1946)

This is a novel in which Meneses takes a further step towards what is going to be the central concern of his fictional investigations: Man's destiny as an individual entity. From now onwards Meneses' characters will begin to see themselves in function of their own identity; the problem being that they know instinctively

that the first thing which needs to be done is to arrive at a clear notion of that most elusive concept. El mestizo José Vargas is a work whose subject matter stresses the state of confusion as to identity to which the character José Vargas is subjected. In the most literal sense, the problem arises because of his mestizo condition.

José Vargas is the son of Aquiles Vargas, a rich landlord, and the Indian Cruz Guaregua. At an early age, Jose Vargas is taken away from his mother's side: "Sin embargo no quiso Aquiles Vargas que Jose Ramon ignorara su origen". Then, with the version of the Vargas, the boy began his life, and:

"Así creció José Ramón.
Estaba en su casa, que era la de los Vargas, pero junto a la silueta romántica de la tía Milita ... existía unida a él por vínculos un tanto oscuros aquella Crucita que le trataba con lejano cariño. Había también los compañeros de la playa y los pescadores que lo llevaban a veces en el bote rompedor del mar espumante."(10)

His attachment to his father's heritage is such that he never feels any conflicting impulse to accept the woman who just happens to be his mother. His life evolves normally until he becomes involved in a scandalous relationship with a woman of the town. When his father intervenes, his attitude to his son opens a breach between them which impels José Ramón to turn his eyes towards the world which he once saw as his own world, that is, his mother's world. The estrangement from his father has revealed something he seems to have

been missing. However, when he turns to the people who accepted him before, and makes it clear that he wants to join them and live the same life, a barrier crops up between them - the barrier created by his father's lineage. At this critical point he realizes that he is confused, that he really does not know which way to turn. And this is a situation which remains unresolved throughout the work. This explains why the last scene of the novel concludes with this pathetic image:

"José Ramón mira el mar. No hay ahora sino la línea incierta del horizonte sin mancha de tierra alguna, incierta en su límite como su propia alma, tendida hacia el futuro como su propia alma, que es una flecha lanzada por el centauro - hombre puro, bestia pura - cuya fuerza es la voz y la vida de las gentes que no tienen nombre."(11)

This is a work in which reflection predominates over action: Meneses in his search for that "forma conveniente" mentioned in his early essay, has planned the novel in a pattern of epic narration. It is formally divided into jornadas, presenting a factual narrative. But this design also allows Meneses to go beyond the narrow preoccupation with the bastard condition of his protagonist and to present José Vargas' problem of identity in terms of its metaphysical dimension. This involves the development of a reflective emphasis in which memory plays an important part. But it is not a memory which is preoccupied merely with recalling the past; it also serves to define the nature of human existence.

"Existe la voz de los ancianos.
Ella es memoria, recuerdo,

conciencia humana. Fue nuestro primer sueño ser gallo, árbol, toro, arena, viento, criatura y dios, unos con el mundo y con nosotros mismos; pero la palabra de los viejos - pesada como semilla - crea sobre el mundo verdadero la profunda tierra del pasado, la negra sombra donde viven los hombres que fueron. Se nos cae del cuerpo nuestra sustancia divina; tristemente, dejamos de ser dioses.

Es lo que llaman tradición, historia, recuerdo, memoria. No somos dioses...

Somos hijos de Juan y María y tras de nosotros estan, Diego, Santiago, Fernando, Margarita. Historia, recuerdos, leyendas, memoria...

...

El hombre se creyó dios. Vive en él a través de los sueños un destino divino que lo une a la tierra y lucha con el destino humano que es la voz de los viejos.

De la tierra surgen los sueños que lo hacen dios; del oscuro fondo del pasado viene la memoria que lo hace hijo de la carne. Luchan en el dos mundos. Es un soñador y crea dioses para confundirse en ellos y ser dios, aunque indirecto, una vez más, ya que no puede dejar de ser hombre, hijo de la carne."(12)

José Vargas' past is lost in the memory of these ancestors, Indians or Spaniards, and even further back in a "pre-racial" memory that can only be conceived of as "recuerdo, conciencia humana."

The plotting of this novel is built around three different settings in time, though two of them are merely the objects of internal allusions within the book. One of these is the primeval time of José Vargas' ultimate origins; the other is the time to which the memories of the Vargas lineage belong. The third and most

important setting is the time at which the actual events of the story take place, inhabited by José Vargas himself in his present state of confusion.

The culminating point in the novel comes when José Vargas finds himself unable to confront his father's authority because:

"Toda costumbre de su vida era respeto, temor por aquel hombre que marcaba el destino sacándolo del rancho de la india Cruz, trayéndolo al Liceo, enviándolo al Tribunal de Temístocles González. La costumbre de toda su vida era plegarse al padre, ver en él la ley obligatoria y buena."

When that habit becomes a source of conflict, José Vargas, in a gesture of self affirmation, turns to his mother's world and begins working among the fishermen:

"José Ramón Mira. Satisfecho, observa sus propios pantalones remangados, sucios de sal, de sudor, de mar, su pecho ancho como un deseo cumplido, donde la respiración muestra la potencia de los pectorales. ¡Ya es hombre libre! ¡Trabajador del mar! Está mirando allí, mirándose a si mismo, cuando suena la voz de su madre:
- ¡Ah, Chuíto! Yo cobro la parte de José Ramón.
"El hecho de que fuera Cruz quien cobrara, complicaba más el asunto y hacía que pareciera a todos aquel montón de lisas - precio del trabajo de José Ramón - nueva tajada que hacía mayor diferencia entre la ganancia obtenida por Chuíto y la mínima parte que tocaba a los otros.

El hijo de Aquiles había visto muchas veces esos repartos

pesqueros, pero fue al mirar los pocos peces que Chuito puso en las manos de Cruz como 'lo que tocaba a José Ramón' cuando notó ciertamente la disparidad entre la parte de los pescadores y la del amo de botes y redes. Pensó - y esa idea aumentó insoportablemente su malestar - que Chuito comenzaba también a aprovecharse del trabajo ajeno, que comenzaba a dominar sobre los demás porque tenía botes y chinchorro pesquero.

Se le hizo insoportable aquello.
Sinceramente emocionado habló:
- Por mí no discutan."(14)

This moment is revealing for José Ramón in two senses. On the one hand, for the first time he becomes conscious of the hard life of the worker; on the other, simultaneously he notices he is not accepted in the group in the way he had thought he would. Their attitudes make him feel like an intruder. This is for the characters a devastating feeling because it sets him apart from every context; this is where José Ramón sees the truth of life: he is alone.

At this point, it is worth noting that the character also has the sudden consciousness of being exploited. This would suggest that Meneses was aware of other perspectives on these problems, whose nature would be political and social rather than metaphysical. However, the pattern of preoccupations in this, as in other novels, reveals Meneses' conviction that the ultimate reasons for Man's situation are to be found in a reality beyond the social. That is why the work concludes with Vargas going back to his previous path and abandoning himself to his father's authority.

José Vargas, the mestizo, ultimately yields again to the paternal authority; his confusion, instead of giving him courage to resist and overcome the situation, inhibits him to such an extent that he becomes incapable of any such gesture.

This novel proposes a search located in two moments in time; the first assumes a consideration of the ancestral past - the starting point for the attempt to rescue an identity lost in the mixture of races; the other involves a confrontation with the present. This is the duality that entraps the mestizo - it is his 'present' which he feels unable to challenge. This destiny is written on the horizon; but he cannot react - his ties with the past, his doubts, the weight of the present combine to paralyze him.

José Vargas was published in the same year as *El Duque* and shows another of the many directions in which Meneses was to move in the search for an answer that never emerges; the quest will lead him to create Julio Alvarado, another Bohemian who finally reaches the conclusion that his existence is "A Destiny Fulfilled" (Un Destino Cumplido) - the title of Meneses's next work.

UN DESTINO CUMPLIDO (1947)

This story describes how Julio Alvarado's personal fate is confirmed for him at the moment of this death. He corroborates his existence as a series of acts and gestures directed towards this one

single result: his own death.

As the representative of this theme Meneses again has chosen somebody from the intellectual sector, in this case, a teacher of Latin who lives perpetually concerned by a deep feeling of anguish which, eventually, brings about his end.

The character is introduced to us at the moment when he is dying and, during his agony, he undergoes a deep process of introspection:

"... y sintió la necesidad de echar una mirada hacia atrás...
El hombre recuerda. Siente como íntimo deber, como obligación absoluta, el deseo de decirse a sí mismo (que es como decírselo a todo el mundo) que sucedió en los años gastados paso a paso hasta llegar a este momento de la obligada confidencia...
El hombre quiere decir la verdad, buscar el YO auténtico y echarlo sobre sus espaldas y ponerlo a hablar - listo para el final de la jornada - junto al inútil montón de sus disfraces y de sus gestos falsos. Listo ya para la Muerte."(15)

All his life Julio Alvarado has been standing on the brink of his personal void, engaged in an earnest attempt to ignore reality whose implications he prefers to elude. His Bohemian life, inspired by an undefinable self-destructive force, has swept him onwards into a state of final collapse. In his agony, in his attempt to recover what he has lost, Julio Alvarado sees himself as a teacher at his desk acquiescing to the unspoken decision to escape from reality by doodling, drawing lines and letters, but, above all, playing with the

word "fracaso" - failure.

"Después de dibujar letras y rayas a lo largo de los días mientras decía sus explicaciones, ya no le bastaba lo sencillo, no se contentaba con pintar estrellas y escribir ALVARADO, JULIO, FRACASO, sino que necesitaba complicar el juego, romper las palabras, trocar el orden de las letras. Escribía FRAC-ASO y llegaba a su mente la casaca sobre la sartén en las brasas de un fogón campesino y era su madre - angustiada mujer que gritaba ¡hijo, hijo! - ... Escribía FRASCO-A pensando en borracheras y FOCA-RAS era el circo y CARA-FOS era el mohín desagradable de su mujer y SACO-FAR era despedida en un puerto, Neruda, olas en el muelle, "amo el amor de los marineros que besan y se van"... ROSA-CAF, palabra triste y como RAFCOSA que le producía incesantes ganas de reír o como AFCAROS que podía ser un insecto o una figura de la mitología griega."(16)

The conviction that life is a failed experiment whose outcome is death, fills Julio with anguish, and his inability to make sense of such absurdity determines his feelings of defeat. Because he does not know yet that his attempt is useless, he delves yet further into his past:

"En realidad, la vida comenzó bajo el sol, en un pequeño pueblo con río vibrante de piedrecillas. Había pobreza. Miseria. La cocina oscura de la casucha pobre y la madre allá metida en sus quehaceres, apasionada y silenciosamente cariñosa, queredora de besos y de llanto... ¡Hijo, hijo! - decía, como si estuviera dándole en los besos leche de

angustia. ¡Hijo, hijo! y lo
empujaba hacia la luz mientras ella
se replegaba en el silencio. -
¡Hijo, hijo!..."(17)

Maybe then, all was already there. His mother's sight, her silent anguish hid that certainty of failure which she wanted to keep out of her son's life. But she also failed. Although, while she was alive, she succeeded, to some extent, in preserving her son from total collapse by assuming the role of the loser herself. It seems as if, after her death:

"Fue entonces como si se hubiese trasladado dentro de Julio los angustiados ojos y los gritos angustiados. Aquello era terrible, angustiante, agobiador y, sin embargo, existía la certidumbre de que siempre había estado con él, de que era un sentimiento antiguo y personal, de que era imposible apartarlo de sí e indispensable por lo contrario, hundirse en lo angustioso hasta ser destrozado por aquello terrible."(18)

Hence, dying is for Julio Alvarado merely the fulfilment of something to which he was foredoomed. In Un destino cumplido - as in El Duque - Meneses seems more and more committed to the analysis of his central character as an individual engaged in his own problematic existence, and isolated from any other context. Such an attitude stands in contrast with some of his earlier works like Campeones or Canción de Negros, in which the focus was upon Man representing some kind of collectivity or a social group. In this story - as in El duque - the emphasis is put upon the individual Man confronted by his personal destiny and by the intimate anguish that the problem

arouses. This altered sense of priorities carries with it other displacements. Country people have been left behind. From now onwards, the focus will be on the inhabitants of the city and, in particular, on characters from the "pequeña burguesía", and their background. But in such^a background, two great preoccupations, above all, make themselves felt with more force: the realization of their personalities and the prospect of death. The revelation of these things to Julio Alvarado, moreover, implies a questioning of traditional institutions such as the family and marriage; from the perspective of his own confrontation, Julio Alvarado has found that these institutions too have failed to provide him with effectual support.

Just as important for Meneses's future fiction is the one thing in all this dissolution of hopes and certainties which remains undissolved. When Julio finally comes to terms with the idea that this is, quite simply, what life is like, and that he must face a destiny which awaits all men, that acceptance in itself becomes a value for him. It inspires both the last words which he speaks to his son, and his own final reflection:

"Ha agarrado con las febriles, trémulas manos de la muerte a su hijo. Le ha dicho, en tropel de palabras, que la justificación de una vida está en cumplir exactamente su destino, aunque éste haya sido el del fracaso.

...

- Tal vez ni siquiera el fracaso; pero de todos modos, un destino: la muerte.

El destino de todos. El fracaso de

todos. Cumplido."(19)

For Julio, of course, that "destiny" is the product of his own total experience of life; for us, as readers, it is something which Meneses has made, by shaping his story in this particular way. It can be seen, then, either existentially - as El duque - or artistically. Meneses' later novels will bring these two ways of seeing human destiny into a closer association.

ALIAS EL REY (1947)

The subject matter of this work concerns Juan de Dios Piñango, who is shot by police and dies feeling that he has achieved the moment towards which all his dreams have been directed. Juan de Dios is the son of the dressmaker Rosa Piñango and Alejandro Garrido, nicknamed "Cara de Luna", a very famous thief. The boy has grown up in the slums surrounding the capital and, from an early age, has dreamt of a moment when he can demonstrate - perhaps by killing a policeman - that he is Juan de Dios, "El Rey". As time passes, he becomes involved in delinquency and, instinctively, develops a growing feeling of fear and hatred for the police whom he considers as his natural antagonists. These feelings resolve themselves into the decision that, one day, he inevitably will have to kill a policeman. And when he is nineteen, he dies doing just that.

The story presents the boy as surrounded by a world of wretchedness that fills his soul with uncontrollable anger. It is no accident that the first view which we are led to observe is of Juan

de Dios being absorbed in the contemplation of his world, possessed by the furious conviction that this is his only kingdom and he himself the only king.

"Estaba sentado al borde de la hondonada. Abajo corría un hilo de aguas negras y, entre los rotos del barranco, se deshacían alpargatas rotas, trozos de hojalata, bacinillas destrozadas, papeles, sucios desperdicios de las casas vecinas. Juan de Dios miraba. Sobre aquel país de la miseria el cielo era demostración de poder. Juan de Dios se miraba a sí mismo. Su pellejo grasiento de negro recogía también los fuegos del crepúsculo; su cuerpo estaba manchado de dorado color; se sentía como si tuviese encima de la carne una capa caliente de seda roja. Sobre sus piernas flacas, sobre sus pies, sucios de barro, caía el buen calor del sol y él pensaba en sus cosas.

- Yo soy el Rey - dijo entre dientes y miró hacia abajo.

Su reino era el barranco sombrío adonde no llegaba el sol. Su reino era toda aquella tierra de barranco, con las podridas yerbas crecidas a la orilla de las hediondas aguas y el túnel donde se hundía la inmunda corriente ...

- Yo soy el Rey - dijo en voz alta.

... Vio cómo su silueta repetía frente a él sus altivos gestos.

- Yo soy el Rey - gritó."(20)

Juan de Dios knows his world. The detritus of the town is his school. There he learns that there are two worlds, this one of

poverty and the other, because:

"... Juan de Dios ayudaba a su madre llevando trajes a los clientes, solicitando medidas, comprando los materiales necesarios. Por ello tuvo contacto con la riqueza desde muy chico. Rosa era costurera de adineradas gentes."(21)

It is that other world, so different from the gully where he now lives, which produces his outburst of anger; it is, above all, the memory of the kind of ladies greeting him: "qué negrito más lindo..." This provokes an uneasiness which he cannot yet define, but to which he responds with his arrogant: "Yo soy el Rey, Yo soy el Rey", which somehow compensates the frustration that his poverty arouses in him. It is something of which he is totally aware, as can be seen later on, when discussing with his friend Teodoro, he points out what is the dominant factor in his situation. So, he explains:

"Uno es negro - explicaba - y ser negro es una calamidad, ¿no?... Pero si se consigue plata, la cosa es distinta. Fíjate tú en Don Nicomedes Peralta, que es negrito y, sin embargo, todos le dicen Don, y le pusieron el Jueves Santo la llave del Monumento, y las hijas parecen blancas de lo bien que se visten. ¿Tú te fijas?... Hay que conseguir plata. De cualquier manera."(22)

Alias el Rey is a work which, in my judgment, still carries Meneses' vacillation as to the way of interpreting reality. The story is framed in such a way that two approaches are possible; they coexist simultaneously, or perhaps, ambiguously. It can be

taken as a denunciation of social injustice, but what happens to Juan de Dios can also be considered as the simple realization of a foredoomed destiny. In the first view of the story, Juan de Dios' behaviour is to be interpreted as the natural response to his living conditions. A simplified restatement of this reading would be: poverty, lack of education plus social abandonment lead almost invariably to crime, in which case the story's conclusion is a logical succession of steps. If the second approach is to be considered, Juan de Dios must be abstracted from his social context, and his experience must be regarded as the realization of a personal destiny. In that case, he must be thought of as predestined to follow a path and, whatever might happen, his fate will be already marked out for him. A crucial stage of his fatality is marked by his meeting with Mama Lolita, who guides him to follow his father's steps. This, encouraged by his instinctive hatred, will finally impel him to utter his final challenge:

"Y de repente, como aquella otra tarde, la rabia venció cualquier sentimiento de defensa y de esperanza. No podía salvarse. No quería salvarse. Iba a matar. Sacó el revólver. Midió cuidadosamente la silueta del más grande de los policías. Disparó.

- ¡Aquí estoy yo, carajo! Juan de Dios, el Rey! - gritó cuando veía caer a su enemigo."(23)

Juan de Dios' destiny was there at the edge of his world: his gully.

In the stories analysed above, the protagonist, coming to understand his situation, attempts in each case to rebel, reaffirming his strength of will through an ultimately self-destructive process, as in "El Duque" or "Un destino cumplido". Or he may escape paternal authority by refusing to mature, as the "mestizo" José Vargas does. Alias el Rey presents a new direction; anger erupts in the character - an anger that has not expressed itself until now - it is uncontrollable, terrible rage that defines Juan de Dios. This impotence is translated into a defiant shout "I'm the King!" Yet it is not enough to save him; that is why he embarks on a gratuitous act of murder which exposes him to his persecutors; though it is no more than a personal gesture, it identifies him definitively with his shout of defiance - a death-call or, as it proved, the assertion of his sovereign will.

This story brings to an end one phase of Meneses' narrative in which the protagonists attempt a reaffirmation of the self, an imposition of sense on their human condition. Yet as Meneses shows, this absurd rebellion does not achieve fulfilment and the search continues - as his next story Tardío regreso a través de un espejo confirms.

TARDIO REGRESO A TRAVES DE UN ESPEJO (1948)

The plot of this story is centred on the encounter between José Prados and the child Raúl Kaufman. José Prados is another of

Meneses' neurotic characters, representative of the urban intellectual type emerging from the newly developing great city. His time is taken up by his combined activity as poet and salesman.

"José Prados. Tiene 46 años. Con menudos pasos rápidos, atildado en su aspecto, ceremoniosamente saludador, corretea las calles caraqueñas. De los centros de negociantes a la tertulia de literatos. Es poeta y corredor con 'carácter público'."(24)

Although he has known fame and recognition, he does not feel happy any longer. His achievements have just raised in him a sarcastic attitude towards life. To José Prados, life is a hazardous game in which he happens to have success. However, despite such apparent success, there is an unease within himself that he does not manage to define. Looking at his mirror he only knows:

"Mirarse y mirar el mundo en el lago de cristal que se sostiene entre las manos. Saber que en el vidrio azogado hay sombras, manchas, misteriosos jardines que no pertenecen a la realidad reflejada; que son - acaso - espejo del espejo. Saber que la poesía es ese espejo y que en él - a veces - valen más las sombras misteriosas que el dibujo de la verdad. Saber (José Prados lo sabe) que, a lo largo de la vida, sólo ha querido estar allí, pendiente del espejo, para decir que las sombras existen y que, mezcladas con la sombra, la imagen del poeta mueve los labios en un rito simple que nombra los reflejos y el misterio."(25)

To the performing of that ritual, he has dedicated a good deal

of endeavour but ~~for some time now~~ a conflicting conviction has taken possession of him, filling his being with anguish.

"Su poesía ... lo cansa y lo desagrada. Le parece el más estúpido de los trabajos imaginar palabras que no digan sino a través de nieblas el disfraz de una mentira adaptada a formas indecisas donde, a veces, corren reflejos de algo que José Prados no tiene ganas de decir."(26)

Such thoughts lead him to consider his life, but he finds that it is nothing but the projection of his will:

"... justa y exacta, lo que él quiso que fuese; solitaria, egoísta, exclusivamente suya. Sin cariños, sin pasiones, sin amistades, sin compañía de ninguna especie."(27)

However, there is still something that is ~~beyond~~ his control:

"Es terrible. A nadie se lo ha contado. ¡Esa angustia asquerosa!... Y es, acaso, lo único que lo hace vivir. Fuera de eso horrible, nada más mueve el interés de José Prados. Casi desea el dolor y el miedo y la angustia cuando observa la soledad absoluta que es él mismo cuando no está temblando de terror."(28)

So his life passes until one day, in the course of his activities as a salesman, a client - Moisés Kaufman - mentions the strange character of the illness from which his young son is suffering. It arouses the curiosity of José Prados and he asks to see the boy who comes carrying a small mirror. This is just enough

for José Prados to recognize in the boy his own reflected childhood, and this vision gives him the idea of a new poem which is to be entitled "Tardío regreso a través de un espejo".

The general structure of this work, in reality, involves two stories: the narration of José Prados and the story of Kaufman. The common element in both narrations is the presence of the poet who is the bridge between the two points in time, because, in fact, each part of the story represents a different moment; the present, i.e. José Prados' time, and the future, i.e. what is to come, or ^{the} child Kaufman's time. The confluence of these dimensions is synthesized in the image of the mirror. This image, already used in Juan del Cine (29) and Adolescencia, is now recalled to suggest a path to be continued by José Prados. Since existence appears meaningless and is unbearable, what is important, then, is to be able to cancel out its emptiness with the game of reflections, as the poet knows:

"Saber (José Prados lo sabe) que
quien mira y dice las palabras del
rito en el espejo, está hundido en
la poesía y devuelve sus miradas
desde la imagen dormida entre las
sombras, como Narciso vuelca en si
su amor. Saber que en aquel mundo
- viva muerte mentirosa verdad - la
vida toma a veces profundidad de
vida y la imagen a veces se
convierte en adorno sombrío que
miente tras sus rasgos de belleza
dormida. Saber que es un espejo la
poesía."(30)

There is the clue, to recreate the world of shadows, to set himself in a steady creative process. Such an involvement is to save the poet from the miseries of merciless reality. This is why, for

the time being,

"Se marcha el poeta a corretear las
calles caraqueñas - de los
corrillos de los comerciantes a la
tertulia de los literatos - Dentro
de sus angustias habituales se le
mueve la sombra de un poema. Un
poema que se titulará: "Tardío
regreso a través de un espejo." (31)

The mirror carried by the boy makes José Prados return to the memory of his poetry. The shadows reflected in the mirror have the property of acquiring the sense of form. The quest to recreate, or to copy such forms provide an excuse to fill the blank spaces. Whenever a form is superimposed on another, it acquires a new dimension whose only possible sense is the alienation of the creator in respect of the hostile reality. In the mirror, time becomes an object which can be handled by man.

This dual story is a rehearsal of what is later developed by Meneses in the form of a game of reflections found in El falso cuaderno de Narciso Espejo where the technique of using different reflections achieves its fullest expression.

There is another short story which, according to the chronological sequence of our analysis, should be included in this chapter. Since our approach, however, is not based on chronological development for its own sake but because there is a correspondence between chronology and Meneses' search for new forms of expression, we have excluded the short story Luna, published in 1946. This exclusion would help to keep a thematic continuity in our analysis.

Nevertheless, in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of Meneses' work, the short story Luna is discussed separately on Appendix II.

CHAPTER V

MIRROR IMAGES

"La mano de la mujer se apoyaba en la vieja pared; su mano de unas pintadas descansaba sobre la piedra carcomida ... Por mirar al muro, el hombre pensó (o dijo) 'Hay en esta pared un camino de historias que se enrolla sobre sí mismo, como serpiente que se muerde la cola'."(1)

LA MANO JUNTO AL MURO (1951)

"Extrañamente permeable y, a la vez, impenetrable pasta verbal de La mano junto al muro, desafía al lector más atento. ¿En qué lapso ocurre la historia? ¿Qué mirada entra y sale de los laberintos psíquicos, para contárnosla? ¿Quién recoge esos datos y los reitera haciéndolos variar? Estas preguntas usuales, se estrellan contra el comienzo que es idéntico al final..."(2)

The story postulates a consideration of Time and Existence which is cast as an inquiry into a murder committed in a brothel. It involves a prostitute called Bull Shit, two, or perhaps, three sailors, and a madman known as Dutch. Besides these characters there are also other elements like a cry, a stone-wall and a mirror.

Regarding the characters we are told about Bull Shit that:

"Ella nunca recuerda nada. Nada sabe. Aquí llegó. Había un perro

en sus juegos de niña. Juntos, el perro y ella ladraban de hambre por las noches, cuando llegaban en las bocanadas del aire caliente las músicas y las risas y las maldiciones. Ella, desde niña, en aquello oscuro, decidida a arrancar las monedas. Ella, en la entraña del monstruo: en la oscura entraña, oscura aunque afuera hubiese viento de sol y de sal. Ella, mojada por sucias resacas, junto al perro. Como, después, junto a los grandes perros que ladraban sobre ella su angustia y los nombres de sus sueños. De todos modos, podía asomarse alguna vez a la ventana o al espejo..."(3)

She is the central figure around whom the other characters move. Then, there is Dutch, ("el que ancló en el túnel para mucho tiempo. Dutch amarrado al túnel por las borracheras. La llamaba Bull Shit.") and the three sailors:

"Porque casi es posible afirmar que fueron tres los marineros: el que parecía un verde lagarto, el del ladeado sombrero, el del cigarrillo azulenco... fueron tres los marineros; sí, no hay que pensar en otras teorías. Lo cierto es que fue el otro quien tenía entre los dedos el cigarrillo. (O el puñal)."(4)

Among these sailors there is one who is particularly enigmatic. His figure is always related to the group, though his identity is never clarified; this is "el hombre que hablaba mucho". From the beginning the doubt is insinuated when he suggests: "Tal vez soy yo el que parecía un verde lagarto", and later on, "la noche del encuentro con los tres marinos (si es que fueron tres los marineros)

apareció él que decía los discursos"; and afterwards, "cuando el hombre que decía los discursos estaba allí, también estaban los marineros...".

The facts of the narrative are elaborations based on the murder of Bull Shit. A cry is heard at the stone wall that surrounds the castle which houses the brothel, and

"La mano de ella resbaló a lo largo del muro; su cuerpo se desprendió; sus dedos rozaron las antiguas piedras hasta caer en el pozo de su sangre; allí, junto al muro, en la sangre que comenzaba a enfriarse, dijeron una vez más sus dedos: 'Aquí, aquí, cuidado, no, no, adiós, adiós, adiós'. Un inútil tamborileo que desfallecía sobre las palabras del hombre: Te quiero más que a mi vida, Bull Shit, virgen. El del sombrero ladeado afirmó: 'Está muerta'."(5)

These elements would seem to suggest a story line, but there is in fact none, or perhaps there are many. It is this contradiction which will define the nature of the story. "En este espejo se podría pescar tu vida. O tu muerte."

"Lo que sucedió la noche del encuentro con los tres marineros (dijimos que fueron tres los marineros) la conmovió, la hundió en las luces de un espejo relumbrante."(6)

Then, it is in the mirror that the clue can be found, the mirror itself the source from which the story arises. José Balza has made the following comments which are worth quoting at some length:

"El movimiento verbal del texto se cumple alrededor de un eje temporal y temático aparentemente simple: aquel momento en que la mano de la mujer, herida, se apoyó contra el muro. Con tan escueta anécdota, Meneses ... cambia su propio destino como narrador; todos sus cuentos anteriores poseen un desarrollo lineal, circular, siempre atentos a la evolución fáctica de la anécdota. La mano junto al muro no solo reduce sus tentáculos anecdóticos a simples puntos de partida sino que los reitera y modula tanto, que los convierte en cánones diferentes de la misma voz.

Para lograrlo, Meneses se apoya en tics verbales de gran eficacia; fragmentos de discursos hechos por el hombre que más hablaba, metáforas casi onomatopéyicas ("aquí, aquí" o "No, no, no") y, sobre todo, el recurso de contaminar las significaciones de ciertas palabras con otras; así la idea de metal atraviesa - oponiéndolas - moneda y espada; el espejo, el techo, la ventana y el mar, se complementan; la mano, la mariposa y el tiempo crean una movilidad idéntica; la moneda, el disco y la boca son el cero y el amor; y el cigarrillo y la llama, el puñal que atraviesa el cuerpo de Bull Shit.

A primera vista no se advierte que el desarrollo de la historia parece un contrapunto; en los cinco primeros párrafos el énfasis pasa de la mano al "hombre" (el de los discursos) que la contempla. Aunque sepamos en qué momentos este habla, siempre estará dirigiéndose a un 'tú' ("En ese espejo se podía pescar tu vida. O tu muerte."). y este interlocutor - la mujer - no cambiará cuando se le hable en vida o muerta. Porque el discurso total - el relato - no está dirigido a ella sino a nosotros.

En el 'hombre' descansa todo el peso teórico del texto ...

De la misma manera como el de los discursos establece los soportes teóricos del relato, y desliza simultáneamente la presencia de la mujer, el cuento comienza de pronto a ser polarizado por la imagen del espejo ... El espejo (la escritura) ya no puede detenerse en si mismo, y empieza a reflejar la pelea, el disgusto, el crimen. 'La cosa comenzó en el cabaret'. Después él (¿el tercer marinero?) la asedia, le ofrece matrimonio. Y ella ve el cigarrillo de metal, el envenenado metal del cigarrillo, la llama que se alza, la llama que baja, el puñal. 'Apartó espejos'. Y las luces, la sangre, los disparos revelan la mano que cae sobre el muro."(7)

"Un chillido (¡Naciste hoy!) tembló en el aire caliente mientras la mano de la mujer se sostuvo sobre el muro."(8)

It is this woman's cry which establishes the narrative movements. Objective references merely provide a pretext for the creation of a form whose ultimate intention is to express the latest results of Meneses' exploration of the meaning of existence. The ambiguity which is inherent in this approach to plotting is also the main resource employed to lend atmosphere to the narration:

"Falta saber si fueron tres los marineros. Tal vez soy yo el que parece un verde lagarto; pero cómo hay dos gorras en el espejo de

Bull Shit?"

"Ella miró la candela cercana a sus labios, la sintió caliente junto a su sonrisa. (La brasa del cigarrillo o la boca del marinero)"

"Miró (en el espejo de sí misma o en el espejo tembloroso del cuarto)" (9)

Each statement represents a new possibility. Cumulatively, everything is possible and nothing is important except the fiction which grows up. It does not matter, really, if Bull Shit had two sailor companions or three; what is important is that by means of these ambiguities it is possible to recreate a parable whose meaning involves the idea of Time, Life and Death. For the cry that is born just beside the stone wall may be considered either as a cry of death or as one of life. "Un chillido ('naciste hoy')". It is taken simply as a cry, which may either mark the birth of something - perhaps a story - or a death, a conclusion.

A crucial aspect of that reflection is the concept of Time, which the story presents as the woman's time: "Tú ahora. Ya. Adiós. Tú ahora. Ya. Adiós. Tú ahora. Ya. Adiós. Y las monedas tenían sentido de reloj." Afterwards, however, this vital time is to become condensed in a global image that synthesizes Existence in itself:

"La piedra y tu mano forman el equilibrio entre lo deleznable y lo duradero, entre la apresurada fuga de los instantes y el lento desaparecer de lo que pretende resistir el paso del tiempo... Trajeron estas piedras hasta aquí desde el mar; las apretaron en

argamasa duradera; ahora los
elementos minerales que forman el
muro van regresando hacia sus
formas primitivas: un camino de
historias que se enrolla sobre sí
mismo y hace un círculo como una
serpiente que se muerde la
cola."(10)

Circular time, repetition, mythical time that strives against decay - all are evoked here. The fundamental opposition between the hand and the wall forms the universe of whatever is doomed to decay and extinction. For the wall, built to challenge Time, is indeed only "reciedumbre corroida por la angustia de lo que va siendo." It declines as if it were of the same fragile nature as the hand:

"Una mano es, apenas más firme
que una flor; apenas, menos efímera
que los pétalos; semejante también
a una mariposa. Si una mariposa
detuviera su aletear sobre la
rugosa pared, sus alas podrían
moverse en gesto semejante al de tu
mano, diciendo "aquí, aquí" o acaso
"adiós, adiós, adiós..."(11)

The wall and the hand have a gradually-discovered likeness, through which Meneses expresses his understanding of life as a confrontation with time. The implication of this contrast is that nothing but decay awaits all that exists, that Life and Death are only links in that chain which is

"...el camino de historia enrollado
sobre sí mismo como una serpiente
que se muerde la cola."(12)

Thus, if Man, being conscious of that circle of life and death, wants to escape, his only way is by the creation of another

dimension of reality, one which he will be able to command.

"...lo que podría separar una cosa en el mundo del tiempo sería, apenas una delgada lámina de humana intención, matiz que el hombre inventa; porque, al fin, lo que ha de morir es todo y sólo uno se diferencia de lo eterno."(13)

And this is precisely what Meneses has tried to do: to create a universe that reveals itself at the threshold of the mirror - or la escritura. This gives him the chance of mastering a reality in which the temporal dimension is neutralized by the simple fact that these reflections are themselves conventional elements. And the convention in which they have meaning is that of writing. For, as we observed at the outset, what the story presents are reflections suggested by the mirror in the woman's room.

"El hombre hablaba muchas cosas. Antes - cuando entraron en el cuarto, cuando encontró en el espejo los blancos redondeles que eran las gorras de los marineros - murmuró: 'En este espejo se podía pescar tu vida. O tu muerte'. Hablaba mucho el hombre. Decía su palabra ante el espejo, ante la pared, ante el maduro cielo nocturno, como si alguien pudiera entenderlo."(14)

In this story Meneses presents a completely new technique of disclosing his conclusions. If looked upon carefully, it reveals that its pattern is that of the detective story, from which Meneses has taken the general scheme: There is a riddle to be deciphered; There is a body of ambiguous data to form the subject of the

investigation. These elements supply the form which Meneses now transfers to his own metaphysical search. Using their ambiguity he created a double level of comprehension which allows him to play with the story as well as with the reader. A simple case of murder transcends simplicity to become meaningful in a new and unforeseen dimension.

Until now we have been following a writer who has been committed to an exploration which in the end has taken him into a cul-de-sac. The absurdity inherent in a life whose end is always death determines a vicious circle to which the reaction is an equivalent form, of the kind which Meneses represents with the image of "una serpiente que se muerde la cola". By means of that, Existence is summed up as ~~zero~~; that is the clearest expression of what Meneses' results have been. Nothingness is the achievement of all his characters' strivings, and it appears as if there were nothing else to be said. There is, however, a gap to be filled: the space between birth and death. It is this which Meneses attempts to represent, the nullity of human experience with a structure that can give that nothingness an appropriate and durable form.

La mano junto al muro is going to be the first step in this new effort of Meneses to express his understanding of reality. Later, the technique of ambiguity is going to be the basis for that major work which is El falso cuaderno de Narciso Espejo.

EL FALSO CUADERNO DE NARCISO ESPEJO (1952)

This work represents a key point in Meneses' narrative art because it consolidates the technical achievements of La mano junto al muro and proceeds, at the same time, to formulate a theory and practice of the art of writing a novel. Simultaneously, the formal organization of El falso cuaderno de Narciso Espejo reflects Meneses' conclusions on his metaphysical investigation.

El falso cuaderno de Narciso Espejo uses a narrative model which serves to explain Meneses' understanding of reality. It is based on an existentialist conception of Man and developed as a narrative structure in exact correspondence with the elusive nature of Meneses' discovery. El falso... also includes all the major themes Meneses has been working on from his earliest stories onwards. This is why the faces and situations in the novel are so familiar. In general, the characters and their activities are fundamentally the same as in his earlier stories, but now there is a change imposed by maturity. The experience Meneses has assimilated from life is reflected in the characters' behaviour. So, we notice changes as what appeared as confusion and fanciful hopes in the characters' youth turns to the nihilism of maturity; the arrogant smile of Julio Folgar becomes the sarcastic gesture of El duque and concludes in the suicide of Juan Ruiz.

El falso... expresses Meneses' consistent search for truth. He has failed, however, to obtain a suitable answer to his need for knowledge. What he has found is a contradiction whose form of

expression is nothingness. This seems to be the only certainty; there is a world of appearances whose deep meaning man cannot know. Therefore, the only possible knowledge is that Man is incapable of knowing anything.

Thus El falso... is the expression of a failure but the act of expression is itself used to transcend the nothingness to which that failure points. To achieve this, Meneses imposes a form on this world of appearances, a form which is cast in the image of the mirror. This process shifts the search to the aesthetic plane, and the aesthetics itself also represents a form of knowledge. To Meneses, uncertainty converted into form means integration into the transcendent nature of art. To convert nothingness into literature represents a possibility of overcoming the former, since that very process means the creation of an alternative reality.

This novel is important both in the development of Meneses' narrative and in the general panorama of Venezuelan literature, because in both contexts it is the first such attempt.(15) The point is made by Julio Miranda:

"El Falso Cuaderno... es posiblemente el primer ejemplo de antinovela, de literatura en la literatura trabajado a fondo en la narrativa venezolana."(16)

The innovations in this moment of Meneses' narrative output are technical. The work is consciously organized as if the memories of the narrators were mirrors. Regarding the composition of the work,

José Balza affirms:

"La composición de El falso cuaderno de Narciso Espejo está voluntariamente expuesta ... Juan Ruiz, Jose Vargas y Narciso Espejo, se suceden en la exposición; uno tras otro retoma los detalles de la historia, para revisarla o tergiversarla, hasta dar el contorno más preciso posible. Mientras leemos, el triángulo de los narradores ... nos deja la certeza de saber que cada voz viene a aclarar, aunque disienta de la anterior... Pero un extraño parpadeo descoyunta en el último párrafo esa seguridad del lector. El triángulo se convierte en cuadrado; ... Ni Juan Ruiz, ni José Vargas, ni Narciso Espejo eran el apoyo central de la historia; un tal Pedro Pérez ha desencadenado todas las búsquedas y suposiciones de los personajes, toda la intensidad del escritor Meneses..."(18)

The work is supposed to be a biography presented in parallel with a series of other testimonies. Their presentation resembles a game of mirrors revealing whatever complementary or contradictory elements go together to form the reflection. This play of appearances leads to a new dimension whose salient feature is uncertainty.

El falso cuaderno ... is developed in terms of its explicit theorizing: the "Teoría de los espejos" contained therein.

"¿Qué son, al fin los recuerdos?
... Si se los toca ya no existen;
sus reflejos sólo tienen valor en
cuanto guardan la posición exacta

del instante en el cual eran espejos de la realidad. Traerlos a la memoria es moverlos de su sitio, cambiarlos del campo de visión que frente a su momento tenían. Un espejo sólo puede reflejar lo que tiene delante. Por lo tanto, los recuerdos no existen. El tiempo es enemigo de todo espejo. Y yo también; porque comienzo a ser viejo, lo que es comenzar a ser tiempo.

Sin embargo, bueno es pretender que se recuerda; decir que los recuerdos sirven para algo; engañarse y engañar, ocultando que sólo son fantasmagorías que en cada quien tienen su origen, su asidero y su final: sombras que, en algún momento, pueden parecer más eficaces que la realidad

Porque bien cierto es que hay un mundo de ternura, de asombro, de milagro en estas sombras del espejo, tanto más atractivas cuanto más sinceramente evocadas. La vieja fábula de Narciso y su moderna complicación admiten una famosa vuelta más. No es sólo que Narciso lllore por lo que de él mire en la fuente ni que entristezca la fuente porque Narciso era su desaparecido espejo. Sucede que la imagen de sí mismo contemplada por Narciso en los remansos del agua no es ya Narciso solamente, sino que a ella está unido un misterio, extraño tanto a Narciso como al agua de la fuente. Ese misterio es lo que puede llamarse 'espejo del espejo'.(19)

In the opinion of John Brushwood, it results in the "novel sometimes coming close to being an essay." This, in my view, is not totally fair because the novel goes beyond pure theory; it

consolidates an image of an evolving consciousness and, at the same time, establishes a claim to our attention and admiration as a purely linguistic construction, existing independently from any story which it might be seen as telling.

El falso cuaderno... is a fragmented structure whose external form consists of two groups of documents: one entitled Expediente del cuaderno y del recuerdo and the other Legajo de la nube y del suicidio. The first part is divided into three "documents": A and B presenting motifs, devices and identity of Juan Ruiz, the narrator, and C, which is the implied biography of Narciso. The second part is formed by a series of documents which, in their turn, amplify, complement or dissent about the content of "Cuaderno apócrifo" (or document C), a total of seven documentos including the Tacha a documento C, which is Narciso's amendment to the autobiography attributed to him.

The nomenclature in this work warns the reader to be prepared to deal with some sort of symbolic dimension. The legal terminology suggests a judgment on a formal confrontation between opposing views. The very nature of the documents - reports, interviews, declarations - suggests a type of material which is characterized by the independence of its parts. This points to the conclusion that the work is to be assumed as a mobile structure. Such formal indications are something new in Meneses' narrative. To see how they function we may begin with Juan Ruiz's words as he introduces himself, preparing the ground for his grand exercise in falsehood: Expediente del

Cuaderno y del Recuerdo.

"Intento explicar el por qué de este trabajo; decir la razón que me guió para inventar las falsas memorias de Narciso Espejo."(20)

From the beginning, Juan Ruiz sets out what are going to be the rules of the game; in other words he is saying: "I am going to write something false but with the appearance of something genuine." Then he goes on to invent his own identity, he describes himself so that he may exist within his fiction, and produce Narciso's false autobiography.

Mi intención es la de darme a conocer antes de empezar ...
... creo necesario dar sobre mi relación previa que sirva de referencia para evaluar mi propio testimonio...

Soy en cierta manera escritor.
Digo en cierta manera porque no es la literatura actividad de la cual derive mis medios de subsistencia ...

Mis actividades de secretario en el almacén de Pérez Ponte suponen escasos ratos de ocio, a pesar de que son consideradas por mi patrón como generosa canongía ...

He aquí un dato relativo a mi persona que es imprescindible tomar en cuenta: soy solterón y seguramente cerraré los ojos en el gesto de aceptación de la muerte sin que mujer alguna me acompañe en el instante final. He pasado ya la cuarentena..."(21)

Juan Ruiz, once created, needs, among other things, a narrator for his false work, and the narrator whom he invents at once claims

the most absolute identity with his character Narciso Espejo. In fact, the transition from Juan Ruiz to his narrator, identified as "his" Narciso, is effected quite openly and explicitly:

"Tan convencido estoy de la igualdad de experiencias, que podría contar su vida como si fuese él el narrador. Podría cederle el YO de mi relato con la mayor naturalidad. Decirle: Narciso, aquí tienes la pluma. Comienza."(22)

In this way, the "implied Narciso" is introduced and immediately takes explicit steps to build up his own image.

"Soy diferente de los demás hombres dentro de la diversidad normal de todos los hombres. Lo que me distingue es - justamente - mi poder de observar, desmenuzar y conocer...

He tenido vocación de espejo...

Me ha divertido dibujar y copiar personajes, ambientes y situaciones que no tuvieran la menor semejanza conmigo o con mis experiencias.

Hoy, en cambio, siento la atracción del espejo...

Efectivamente, deseo ser mi verdad ahora. Siento que mi vida merece ser contada. He decidido escribir los reflejos de mis recuerdos, mi biografía...

Comienzo mi historia.

Mi nombre es Narciso Espejo.

Doy por supuesto que nadie entenderá que esas palabras constituyen un nombre como los demás. Al decir que me llamo Narciso Espejo esbozo una definición y no doy el dato para la cédula de ciudadanía. Mi nombre se mira en mi apellido. Para explicar porqué me llamo Narciso Espejo escribí una vez una leyenda que voy

a transcribir en seguida."(23)

One fiction here generates another. Narciso (the fictional Narciso, invented by Meneses' fictional Juan Ruiz) bases his own image upon a legend written by himself. In both cases - Juan Ruiz and Narciso - the device of "reflection" has been consistently used. In Juan Ruiz's case an empty form begins to assume shape through a narrator who, under the influence of powerful feelings, is impelled to create a reliable version of himself. In Narciso's case, the created subject can only be reflected by a nature similar to his own. So one reflection is magnified in another, whose roots in turn cannot be traced because they become lost in the infinite regression which is implicit in the myth. Already, at this stage, the narrator has managed to build up quite an elaborate form whose foundations are literally non-existent. Behind each fictitious existence lies another, yet more doubtful fiction. It is on just such a basis that Narciso's false memoirs are going to be narrated.

"Puedo decir que no hay recuerdos igual que puedo decir que no hay sueños: los sueños son los espejos del futuro. Sólo el presente es el misterio suspendido entre sueños y recuerdos, como insignificante certeza que copia el doble reflejo del pasado y del futuro, el sitio donde se observan los rostros iguales de la memoria y del deseo."(24)

This quotation synthesizes the attitude of the narrator towards time and towards questions of fact. What is being attempted throughout the Cuaderno is to capture Narciso's image and keep it,

timeless, confined to the mirror's surface. That is to say, to print it in "escritura". To look into the looking glass becomes more than a simple action: it introduces a temporal dimension: Narciso's eternal present time. Absorbed in the mirror, caught by his reflection, Narciso evokes and such evocation annuls the current time and makes of it the mirror's time, i.e. escritura. In such evocation the images slip out, one image lending its support to another. The product of all these images is a heightened sense of fictionality created by the earlier transition from Juan Ruiz to Narciso. To achieve Narciso's image, Juan Ruiz had to renounce his own identity and allow himself to be absorbed into a transcendent identity, defined by the parable of the name Narciso Espejo: "Mi nombre se mira en mi apellido", the disclosure of this parable is what is definitively Narciso's biography or "Cuaderno Apócrifo", on which Jose Balza comments:

"El 'Cuaderno' no es unicamente la parte más extensa del libro, la relación más rígida, sino que también guarda de manera precisa la autobiografía de Narciso Espejo; rasgos todos que, mientras afirman la presencia anecdótica, dan mayor fuerza a la posibilidad de ser falsos, porque como lo afirma el subtítulo, todo allí es 'apócrifo'."(25)

The "Cuaderno Apócrifo" involves the narration of Narciso's life from childhood: his mother, his city, the house, his father, his friend Juan Ruiz. Later, his youth will be evoked: his studies, Dona Rosita's lodging house, other friends (José Vargas, Pérez Ponte, Lola Ortiz) all his memories up to the symbolic "act of the medal" which

marks the beginning of maturity. At this point the biography finishes.

"El legajo de la nube y el suicidio" forms the second part of the work. In the course of its seven documents it is made clear what has happened to Narciso Espejo and his friends. The pretext for that narration is the appearance of a cloud over the city and the consequences which it brings.

Meneses presentation of these documents bear witness to his consistent aim - that of explaining reality. The most important feature of the whole set is ~~their~~ fragmentary character. Each document puts forward a partial view of the facts; they are, after all, presented as the work of different narrators and, on occasion, even of a multiple one. They are notable, too, for the appearance of a new character: Narciso Espejo. For, as we must be aware, there are two Narcisos. The one that is the creation of Juan Ruiz - the narrator of the pseudo-autobiography, and the second is simply a character in Meneses's fictional world. This second Narciso is going to play an especially important role because he is going to undertake to establish the truth in relation to what has been said earlier in document "C". Narciso's explanation takes the form of the Tacha al documento "C", and it is this explanation which finally establishes the domain of uncertainty, because its only sense is implied in the contradiction it expresses. All this is to represent the ambiguous forms in which Meneses has found that reality is manifested. Under these terms Meneses produces his game of reflections, i.e., the various mutually contradictory documents. Each one of them

postulates a relative truth and the relativity is our only clue to the meaning of reality.

Reality is a chaos and it can only be perceived partially. The harmony of existence known during childhood and part of youth, has been broken into pieces by life. The balance between hopes and reality has been broken down, and it is reality which prevails. The yellow cloud becomes a symbol of the kind of loss which is involved in this. The intensity of its colour provides a specific measure of anguish with which it is associated. When it first appears, it is introduced as luz:

"... un inmenso cuerpo de brillante
gordura.

...luz parecida a muchas cosas...
desagradable tono mineral
Mancha de orín. Oxido."(26)

Gradation is the clue to understanding its effects.

"-luz rara, amarilla, violenta
- como de cobre
- como grasa de gallina
- amarilla y pegajosa (como
manteca de gallina, como
gordura de rico, como barriga
de Pérez Ponte)."(27)

The tonal intensity increases the aura of emotional tension and the atmosphere becomes polluted, to such an extent that "un asesinato. Y un intento de suicidio" are attributed to it. The yellow cloud unmasks life's true face. Its appearance shows what reality is like. It discovers a revolting loneliness in the people's faces, and this is confirmed and amplified when Juan Ruiz, José

Vargas and Lola Ortiz are brought into focus. The yellow cloud discloses the misery in these people's souls and links them to a series of events that motivates the gathering at the Vasco de Aguirre' restaurant.

"Esa noche nos reunimos con motivo especial ... Decía Juan que era imprescindible que habláramos de la nube amarilla. (Esa nube que todos los habitantes de la ciudad habíamos visto detenida sobre los techos de Caracas.)

Juan la relacionaba con un asesinato - y hasta con un intento de suicidio - y decía que Vargas preparaba un reportaje sensacional sobre los sucesos ocasionados por la nube. Al decir de Juan, era indispensable que yo estuviera presente para hablar de esos proyectos. Además, dijo que tenía que entregarme un documento muy importante."(28)

The yellow cloud confirms that the harmony of Narciso's world does not exist any longer. The light of the yellow cloud reveals the bitter frustration of Juan Ruiz, miserably working in Pérez Ponte's factory, forever sharing his loneliness with Lola Ortiz without their ever being able to communicate with each other. José Vargas, the journalist and Perez Ponte, the businessman, share a similar predicament. All of them project the same image of being subordinated to the same tragedy: the senselessness of everyday life. Whether their hopes are fulfilled or not, they have to go on living. They are beings determined by their attitude towards time. Their life is an endless string of small battles won in the everyday

struggle not to be worn down altogether. This confrontation with life has revealed that existence does not lead anywhere. Nothingness is the only end, but it cannot be borne. This explains the need which these characters experience to overcome emptiness. To that end, they all react in a similar way-by escaping. These characters are still very much in 'ag with the model Meneses has been exploring since his earlier works. Once again they are middle-class individuals condemned to frustration because they already know they cannot change the shape of their lives. They are isolated in the city, merely trying to survive, or at best, attempting to express themselves in their final gesture of revolt, like Juan Ruiz writing Narciso's biography; like Lola Ortiz inventing love affairs to ~~fight~~ her loneliness; or like Narciso who in pursuit of the truth undertakes the amending of "El falso cuaderno" by writing his "Tacha al documento C".

What Meneses has produced out of all this is a pre-eminently verbal construction, since its raw material consists of statements whose aim is simply to contradict what is contended in the other documents. Such a contradiction determines the emergence of a relative truth, the one which remains when every possible 'true' reading has been examined and reflected. That is to say, if the documents issued by the narrators are mutually exclusive, the confrontation between them, in the meantime, has produced a third version of the events - the version produced by the reader.

This state of affairs gives language an outstanding role in the work. It is regarded as an instrument for projecting reality, as

well as a phenomenon in itself. First, the exposition of the facts encourages the critical faculties; then, the reflective capacity of language invites us to look more closely at the premises of that exposition.

The work is developed in a formal language which, from the beginning, claims to be derived from the conventional nature of the texts presented. The first hint is given by the title itself: El falso cuaderno de Narciso Espejo. This advises us of the kind of issue we are about to deal with.

The same happens with the nomenclature used for the various parts of the work. These names suggest the assemblage of evidence for some sort of trial - a view which recalls the "notebook" of the main title.

The different narrators determine a range of different registers of language which function in accordance with their well-defined characteristics. In Juan Ruiz's case, for instance:

"Intento explicar el porqué de este trabajo; decir la razón que me guió para inventar las memorias de Narciso Espejo. No en balde he dedicado tanto tiempo a esta tarea y considerado como algo más que un juego literario la decisión de dibujar la vida de Narciso, compañero habitual durante unos cuantos años de existencia."(29)

The expression of this narrator is supported mainly on a conceptual basis. Explanations, repetitions and digressions form a heavy verbal web which hinders the fluency of the discourse.

They make it stuffy and overformal as, for instance, in this piece quoted by Juan Ruiz himself:

" ¡Qué escuchén las muchachas, los amigos, la palabra que me dicta la Muerte! Cuando yo muera (y es que, creed, ya he muerto), no digáis atención que ha muerto Juan el compañero!"(30)

The direct statement here is inflated with a whole series of invocations and anachronisms. Such a profusion underlies Juan Ruiz's inability to cope with a balanced expression. However, when the transition from Juan Ruiz to Narciso takes place, a change can be observed. Here is the supposed Narciso:

"Pretendo sentir la más sincera emoción al escribir estas palabras
...
Soy diferente de los demás hombres dentro de la diversidad normal de todos los hombres. Lo que me distingue es - justamente - mi poder de observar, desmenuzar y conocer."(31)

Narciso's expression at once strikes the reader as far more temperate. There are no invocations, no categorical statements, instead, there is a smoothly-flowing language. Conceptualization, and a rather persistent tendency to explanation, are still habits here, but they are at least stripped of the rhetorical excesses used by José Ruiz. A further improvement can be observed when Narciso introduces himself by means of a legend. Unlike Juan Ruiz, Narciso does not seek to build up a conventional image, but sets himself midway between history and myth by creating a

spurious legend. Such an artifice makes his self-portrayal a poetic exercise, and this places Narciso firmly in the domain of literature. One level of literary creation slips into the other when Narciso announces that he is going to transcribe his legend. This is the final stage of the process whereby he is located within the compass of the literary form. As if to reinforce this, document "C" - the "Cuaderno Apócrifo" - now begins. The increasing "literariness" of any notion we have been able to form of what Narciso is, has now reached the point where he appears to be no more and no less than an act of pure creation. And so he proves to be in Document C, whose reality, from whatever angle it may be analysed, turns out to be guaranteed by no other form of self-consistency than the purely linguistic. Language here has more than an instrumental function, it is important as a form too. As such, it reflects the realities it purports to describe ('content'), but it also reflects itself. This makes possible a double critical process - a criticism of reality through the representation of the facts, and of language by means of the multiple "desdoblamientos". This offers such a range of possibilities that it is not rare to find new forms one inside the other, as, for example, here:

"Voy a incluir en este mi cuaderno de memorias - o de olvidos - mis reportajes sobre la peste. Me parece indispensable incluirlos, porque los acontecimientos que describen están relacionados con sucesos personales que se desarrollan más tarde. Aquí van."(32)

Menesian language aims at a kind of transparency by deliberately

revealing whatever artifice is being used at any given time. The search for truth implies an unveiling of one's own resources. Thus, to revert to Juan Ruiz once more, his explanatory tendency must be regarded not only as a proof of his deficiencies as a narrator, but also as one of his strategies to point to better narrative procedures. Similarly, the use of repetitions is designed to reinforce the fictional nature of the work. That repetition represents an attempt to give sense of circularity in the novel. And this is something which Meneses has been seeking because it provides an impression of timelessness. It thus becomes possible to avoid a confrontation with time:

"El tiempo es enemigo de todo
espejo. Y yo también; porque
comienzo a ser viejo, lo que es
comenzar a ser tiempo."(33)

Time in this novel demands some general considerations, since it is one of Meneses' most persistent preoccupations. The passage of time is something of an obsession for him, that is why he explores so many devices to keep it motionless. The use of verbs, for instance, has been worked out to reinforce the sense of timelessness. Within the work, the present tense is deployed alternately with the past tense. At any time, however, the idea of actuality may be reinforced by the narrator who on several occasions interrupts the past tense to intervene with some observation in the present. An example where Meneses' parenthetical self-commentary is at its most characteristic is provided by the following:

"Perdonen ustedes si hablo en
presente - si utilizo el presente

de indicativo de los verbos - pero
siento los acontecimientos
relacionados con mi conversación en
el bar del vasco Aguirre como
sucesos en los cuales todavía esta
enredada mi atención. Digo - en el
presente indicativo..."(34)

It emphasizes that the narrator is engaged in a motionless present. Time does not elapse because the narrator holds everything within a stable "now". It is as if he were contemplating mirror-images caught in an eternal present, because none of these images has any real existence.

For Meneses, all the contradictions of existence, all these ideas framed by the mirrors, constitute a challenge. They have to be reorganized in terms of his own will. To this end, he alters the original nature of these reflections, that is to say, he transforms his memories into literature, and presents them in terms of a model of his own. That model in its most complete state is, of course, El falso cuaderno de Narciso Espejo. Meneses not only produces the novel, he also enunciates its theory. To illustrate this we may point to certain aspects of the composition of "Document C". We already know that the principal step which Juan Ruiz had to take towards producing "Document C" was the creation of the narrator, for a theme which he had in mind for a long time: that of Narciso's biography. The second step, as Salvador Tenreiro points out,

"... tiene que ver con el proceso de selección del que hablaba Dilthey y que precede a cualquier acto de escritura. En El falso cuaderno, Narciso Espejo echará mano de uno - o de todos - de los materiales siguientes:

- el narrador posee un antiguo documento para guiarse
- en el texto del referido documento puede haber falsificaciones
- O puede ser una simple copia del documento primitivo, en el cual se han interpolado multitud de datos falsos.
- El documento puede ser un libro de memorias.
- Un pergamino donde está dibujado un mapa.
- Un trozo de materia encerrado en una botella que arrojó al mar un nevegante perdido.
- Las imágenes guardadas en el fondo de un espejo.

The consideration of all these possibilities reveals Meneses' awareness of his own double game. Quite deliberately, he seeks to highlight the multiple possibilities of approaching fiction, using his narrative output as the pretext. This "maker of lies" - Meneses - wants not only to write a novel but to develop a body of theory to support his chosen way of writing it. "El reflejo inteligentemente preparado puede ser más valioso que la verdad." This affirmation by the pretended Narciso states the nature of the materials at his disposal. Among the options from which he might here choose his subject matter, the narrator selects "las imágenes guardadas en el fondo de un espejo." He reinforces that choice with an explanation based on his name: Narciso Espejo. This establishes the point of departure for that elaboration of Meneses whose exposition is a step-by-step account of its own production. For example, in "Document C", the sequence of the episodes gives an account of the process carried out in the composition work. To begin with, the

first subtitle presents the theoretical frame of the novel, it is the exposition of the Teoría de los espejos. The second episode announces La ciudad de Dios, which recreates the spiritual background and the influence that such a background determines. La presencia del pecado represents the type of values; and La lucha contra el pecado, the beginning of the contradiction; La caída de la ciudad de Dios, represents the rebellion. Aparición del tirano, Los ejidos del alma, La figura del padre, etc. In this way, progressively, the narrator carries on building up the whole imagery of Narciso's world.

There is a similarly conscious presentation of each of the elements which build up the biography as such. As part of the same habit of self-commentary, a verbal formula is devised to suggest a forward movement in the creation of the fiction:

"Voy formando mi humana arquitectura con la lentitud de un maestro de obras que dirige el trabajo de sus albañiles. Lanzo hacia el pasado el anzuelo de la conciencia; regreso hacia las desdibujadas experiencias de mi vida; voy engarzando una escena apenas existente, el atisbo de un pensamiento, el ordenamiento de un mundo dentro del cual habían de caer mis pasos..."(36)

The progressive tenses suggest a process - something which is in train. At every moment the fictional nature of this activity is emphasized by the steady underlining of the fact that this theory is being composed. In this way, Meneses, by means of his narrator, develops the story while simultaneously spelling out the degree of

sheer artifice which this involves. This practice of conscious artifice is insistently emphasized to recall the artificiality of the text, as in the following example:

"Hasta había inventado una pequeña nota para relacionar mi sacrilegio contra el Sacramento de la eucaristía y la subsiguiente visita al burdel. Había escrito:

'La vecindad de tiempo entre el acto del burdel y el acto de la hostia no es simple producto del azar literario que enreda recuerdos con determinado propósito...

Pero volvamos al caso de mi relato. Cuando inventé los "actos en cadena" inventé, en cierto modo, el más importante de los disfraces que he metido en este juego de espejos de mi historia...(37)

The same insistence on underlining the artificiality occurs with the fictionalization of Juan Ruiz's memories (p. 418) and in the story of Narciso told by Juan de Dios (p. 401-2), and the same happens in the case of anticipations like that related to the "Acto de la protesta"(p. 430).

The effect of all these interferences with the time pattern of events narrated is to subsume that "natural" time into the artificial, continuous present which is the characteristic temporal movement of the act of narration. In other words, this is not a novel which creates a fictional equivalent for reality; rather, it fictionalizes time as a function of its own narrative mode.

By contrast, El falso cuaderno de Narciso Espejo, does develop

the concept of space along traditional lines, as an imagined physical dimension, though it is also possible to envisage space here in another sense - as a conventional profile defined in terms of verbal production.

The novel's central spatial motif is the city. This is depicted from two different perspectives. One involves the images deployed by the narrator (Juan or Narciso). The other corresponds to the focus projected from the appearance of the yellow cloud. In the former of these perspectives, the city is presented as the necessary environment for the apprenticeship of life. This is, in fact, what the city means to the narrator. In this part of the book, it constitutes his main source of knowledge and defines the boundaries of his experience, Narciso exists as memory - memory born from the city. Or, as he himself affirms:

"... si me preguntasen de nuevo de dónde vengo, diría que el sitio de mi nacimiento está iluminado por brillantes crepúsculos donde se cruzan graves campanadas, vuelos de pájaros, escalas musicales junto a la sombra de la montaña venerable. Dentro de la casa hay una lámpara azul sobre el negro brillo del piano. Y esta la penumbra de la falda maternal... Los hilos de los recuerdos me llevan hasta allá, como me llevan hasta oscuros seres sin nombre y hasta la frente majestuosa de una montaña en cuyos lomos se alzan las casas de la ciudad donde nací. Una ciudad de luz que se llama Caracas."(38)

The neighbourhood supplies the first concepts which he has learned; the town, its streets, the names; home, his mother, her

love; the living room, the piano. All these are the contacts which enable Narciso to establish an ever more complex relationship with reality. When this presentation through reverie is confronted with the picture of the town under the yellow cloud, a profound difference emerges between the two visions. Above all, the city of childhood suggests apprenticeship, faith, warmth, love, while under the yellow cloud, what is implied is just the cancellation of what had been Narciso's city of light and hopes.

Yet, this highly concrete realization of a particular experience, located in a particular city, is itself grounded in a conscious and deliberate use of abstraction. Underlying the imagined spatial concreteness of the book, Caracas, there is the assumption of what we may call a "literary space." This is the area of possible imaginings defined for us by the mutually exclusive documents written by Juan Ruiz and Narciso Espejo, and by the sense of inner tension which their contradictions promote. The other documents have an instrumental role in this; they exist as the supporters of the story which otherwise would founder on its own contradictions. The presence of these other testimonies is designed to underwrite the possibility of a reflective pattern: Juan Ruiz and Narciso exist because each can be proved within the other's existence. This series of reflections is like life: it can be entered at any given point, though it is already known that the series will lead nowhere. Meneses' search has become consciously an aesthetic experience as he plans Narciso's life first and foremost as a literary creation.

In conclusion, we might say that El falso cuaderno de Narciso Espejo bears witness to an important moment in Meneses' aesthetic maturity. The work is framed in such a way that it manages to express the whole human dimension of his search. Meneses is revealed as an alternative observer both of himself and his background, except that, by contrast with the mythical Narcissus, Meneses' attitude is not restricted to individual considerations; rather his reflections are given a wider reference, through the conventions of literature - or through that of the mirror. Meneses, through El falso cuaderno, invites the reader to confirm his truth by taking part in the inquiry into his destiny, and he makes him a creator by involving him in the responsibility for making and remaking the documents. Thus, the search never ends, because Meneses' falsehood, "el reflejo sabiamente preparado", is forever being confronted with a perpetually renewed truth - the reader's truth.

CHAPTER VI

SELF KNOWLEDGE

EL DESTINO ES UN DIOS OLVIDADO (1958)

This story concerns an Indian prince for whom living is a source of humiliation since he survived his warriors when fighting against the invaders of his empire. After their defeat:

"Bravo está muerto. Fino y Pájaro y los otros - cuyos nombres no existen - han sido colocados debajo de la tierra o en los nichos oscuros de las prisiones o en las ignoradas tareas que no admiten revueltas ni gritos.

Vencido, en cambio, ha sido trasladado a los lujosos departamentos del palacio que puede seguir teniendo como suyo. Ha vuelto a dirigir ceremonias oficiales y juzga los asuntos y litigios como antes de la llegada de los extranjeros; pero, cuando actúa y decide, uno de los jefes vencedores está presente y es necesario comunicarle en su lengua un resumen del asunto tratado y de la decisión. El extranjero podrá oponerse si considera injusta la decisión."(1)

The partial restitution of his state has set him in an even more outrageous situation because his acceptance of it implies the betrayal of his people and of all who died fighting for freedom. His submission has converted him into "solamente un intérprete más respetado que los otros." What were the reasons for him to think he was the legitimate heir of a dignified existence, have turned into a

reality in which

"momentos hay para el respetado intérprete en los que la vergüenza le calienta las orejas y siente como si se detuviera su sangre. Le molesta la certeza de estar vivo, de comer, de dormir, de haber llegado a pedir una mujer para sus noches.

(Se ha creído poderoso en el instante del amor, dueño de la oscura tierra humilde de la ocasional compañera - capaz, ella también, de otro poder oscuro de la común comedia de la embustera ternura. Engañados los dos por el espectáculo de darse uno al otro como si fueran libres).

Está vivo. Siente asco de sí mismo, porque está vivo. Ayer sorprendió su propia risa al escuchar un chiste del capitán de los guardias extranjeros - el de los rojos pelos de mono - sintió bochorno y náuseas de haber reído."(2)

It seemed as if Vencido's destiny had erred. He, a prince born for a life of pride and prestige, is now condemned to the shame of his own disrespect. There is his laughter to confirm humiliation; it turns against him accusingly to remind him of his shameful condition. For Vencido there is no escape, to die would be a relief, as he reflects:

"sabe que la muerte - una de las tantas muertes que pudo imaginar como lección, leyenda y ejemplo de su pueblo - sería el único gesto que arreglaría la insignificante existencia que ha aceptado. Pero sabe también que no podrá escoger muerte alguna.

- Ha sido perezoso y cobarde.

- Todavía - en raros momentos de esperanza desea creer que sabrá

decidir la hora de su solemne
desaparición. Cuando un hombre se
desprecia a sí mismo, el efímero
encuentro con una forma de
esperanza es el engaño que le
permite soportarse un poco más,
siempre un poco más."(3)

That he is seemingly his own master, is precisely his
condemnation. To think that he will be able to decide anything is
the most pathetic feature of his condition, though truly it is
nothing but another form to prolong his self regret.

Meneses published this story six years later than El falso
cuaderno de Narciso Espejo and it seems as if the walker left behind
in the last paragraph of El cuaderno were coming back to continue
with his reflections. Only this time, the walker does not carry with
him any hope, his attitude is that of a sceptical man who is
convinced that for him there is no other possible destiny but that of
Vencido. Hence, it can be said that what is to come is an
elaboration solidly based on the convention of a divertissement, to
play while time passes. As Vencido spends his time recreating his
origin or the pride of his predecessors, Américo Arlequín, "un hombre,
como Pedro Pérez - u otro nombre sin especial distinción..." plays
with his past, with his city, but never with ^{his} future. In La misa de
Arlequín, Meneses' next work, as readers, we are invited to accept
the convention of the "Chinese box" or the "Russian doll set", that
is to say, to begin a ludicrous search in the company of Américo
Arlequín.

LA MISA DE ARLEQUIN (1962)

In La misa de Arlequín, Meneses attempts for the last time to give meaning - by playing - to his vision of life. Here, as elsewhere, it is the characters who serve as the instruments of that attempt. This novel presents one hard-pressed individual's strategy for breaking free from the confines of the reality which oppresses him. He is enabled to do so because he assumes a multiple identity. And this multiplicity is expressed through the novel's unusual form. It unfolds as an interplay of projections, which gradually build into a mythified version of Venezuelan reality. Through this myth-making, and through the range of alternative identities which he presents, the actual identity of the protagonist is established. But at the same time, and underlying that process, there is a change in the central character himself. He moves gradually away from imprisonment in his own self-absorbed state, becoming increasingly open, committed and responsive in his relations with the external world.

In the opening pages of La misa de Arlequín, as in El falso cuaderno, much stress is laid on the necessity of writing. For Meneses, evidently, the narrator, reorganizing and interpreting the chaos of "given" experiences, is a type of artist whose task is to mediate reality to the world at large. It is a view of the artist's role - but not exclusively the artist's - closely paralleled in a remark of Colin Wilson:

"If there is to be order in the universe, ... then it must be seeable, touchable, so that it could be regained by some discipline. Art is only one form of such discipline."(4)

As for Meneses's characters, given the sensitive natures with which they tend to be endowed, it is not at all strange that they should elect to express their concerns through narration, that is to say, through the making of literature. Literary art is a natural choice for them to make; the more conscious they become, the more necessary it becomes to set down their experience in writing. As a result, they appear before us less as individuals who in one way or another act, than as their own creators, whose primary functions are to reflect and to write. The most important fact about José Martínez's life is the fact that he writes about it.

It is this that he undertakes to do at the beginning of the novel:

"Se que debo escribir esto pronto...
Quiero contar mi vida, relatar lo que ha sucedido, explicarme a mí mismo el sentido de mi existencia."(5)

La Misa de Arlequín corresponds to this aim. It is a frame-story in which the outer frame is supplied by Martínez's diary. He is also the author of a Relato or report, excerpts from which are given as the diary advances. A second series of extracts, in some ways parallel to the first, comes from La novela de Arlequín, including several - "La Cantata del Rey Miguel" and "El ballet de los

Coroneles" - whose genre is as much musical as literary. In the diary, José Martínez tells the story of his own life; in the Relato de José Martínez, the focus of attention is extended to the members of the group "Los Amigos de Dios"; La Novela de Arlequín presents its author-protagonist as writing "para zafarse de sí mismo." This last text, in particular, seems to go out of its way to emphasize its own literariness, and indeed, it is, objectively speaking, a fiction engendered by another fiction. It pretends to be a liturgical act with which his author attempts the confrontation of his reality. It carries, as we shall see, a wholly negative message. Yet that negativity is belied - and perhaps to some extent even overcome - by the work's exuberant and inventive rhetoric.

Each one of these three main textual components has an identifiable function within La Misa de Arlequín. Martínez's autobiography, for example, delves deeply into his personal life in search of reasons for his oppressive sense of failure. The report on the "Amigos de Dios" offers a very different angle on reality, it is an ironic reflection about the others who, because of their naive understanding of life do not suffer Martínez's apprehensions, but who like Martínez himself, are also doomed to failure. The report also supplies the transition that leads on to the figure of Américo Arlequín. Arlequín's own novel plays an integral part; it transforms the characteristic incoherence of José Martínez's experiences into a creative consciousness. In that process, Martínez's awareness of the useless nature of all hope is no longer a weakness, but becomes a source of strength.

Martínez's self-portrait is that of an individual who openly defies the establishment by breaking the rules which any middle-class citizen is expected to follow. He had begun life, indeed, in utter conformity to those traditional values - so much so that their pressure upon him had produced a virtual collapse of his identity. His total subordination to them had driven him to the ultimate evasion of selfhood - "30 años serenamente exactos en el cumplimiento de mis obligaciones". So unbearable does this experience become for José Martínez that when he attempts to realize himself, the one course open to him seems to be that of self-destruction. At the time of writing - he is now in his fifties - José Martínez can still muster his energies for one last attempt to give some sort of meaning to an existence which is now perceptibly slipping away from him. Yet that existence is, to all appearances, quite aimless, or so he has come to see it, insofar as his experience of life has not granted him any kind of happiness. Of his family background he recalls:

"Nací en una familia a la cual por diversas razones desprecio. La madre no existió nunca o se murió pronto. El padre, los hermanos, ni siquiera distingo unas de otras esas sombras estúpidas y perversas, cobardes y egoistas."(6)

If he could recover any good memory of himself amongst all this, it would be a step towards recovering a lost identity. But his recollection merely underlines what he knows already: that he has been unable to establish any human relationship with his family or anyone else in any more than a minimal fashion. All that his remembering does for him is to confirm his isolation, and to make him aware of

the other forms of social pressure. Indeed, it actually helps to reinforce his chosen strategy of self destruction.

"He dicho que no se quién soy. Que eso a quien todos llamamos YO es para mí algo extraño, antipático, poco conocido, con el cual sólo es posible una relación: LA BORRACHERA. Fuera de ella no existo, no quiero permitirme existir."(7)

Drunkenness is the chosen escape by which Martínez tries to cheat the disappointment of his existence. The senseless nature of all that understanding reveals to him, leads him to a state of anguish which, in its turn, is of no greater use to him. No matter how hard he tries, each attempt to escape is yet another failure. The outcome of his recourse to alcohol is already foreseen; his insight tells him what it will be.

The change of strategy which this demands of him is marked in the narrative by the transition from the autobiographical frame to Martínez's Relato, and thence in turn to the Novela de Arlequín. Essentially, he turns away from his life-denying, self-absorbed attitude, and adopts an extrovert, creative, vitalist posture. He ceases to reject the experience of reality, and learns to use it to his own advantage, by converting it into myth. The activity of myth-making casts a veil over objective circumstances; inherently transcendent in character, it establishes a different dimension of existence in which Martínez's pointless anguish can be transformed into meaningful imagery.

His point of departure is fear - fear, and the realization that the strategy of drunkenness, to whatever extremes he may pursue it, is getting him nowhere. But the actual incident of his change of direction is narrated in such a way as to bring other factors into play; the shift of literary perspective to the Relato and the Novela, and the undertaking to make some sense after all out of the paradoxes of his own existence:

"Una noche, me desperté de mis torpezas tendido junto a una de las cloacas de la ciudad en compañía de seres que se me acercaban con degradante e irritable afán de sacarme dinero. Eran - lo recuerdo muy bien - como una bandada voraz de peces o de gelatinas. Proponían cualquier forma de actividad - sexo, hambre, alcohol - para obtener de mí también cualquier forma de goce miserable.

Tuve miedo al día siguiente y fue entonces cuando llegué sin un céntimo, manchado de todos los sucios al periódico donde mi antiguo amigo el director del diario 'Mañana' me señaló el trabajo de reportero con Américo Arlequín.

Fue entonces cuando trabajé, cuando hice el reportaje sobre la sociedad "Amigos de Dios" y Luz Montero.

Fue entonces cuando Arlequín me entregó sus notas de novela.

Fue entonces, mi tiempo de la última ocupación, del último trabajo."(8)

The Relato is José Martínez's opportunity to give narrative shape to experiences which are not his own but shared among members of the "Amigos de Dios". These people beset, like him, by poverty

and the anguish of an indescribable rootlessness have come together in a sort of sect, centred around the figure of Luz Montero, half priestess and half witch. Their cult provides Martinez with the raw material for his report, and it is the writing of the report which enables him to analyze and interpret the reality about him by giving it, initially, an artistic form.

The "Amigos de Dios" offer another perspective on the life of the city; they are a representative portrait gallery of poverty, ignorance and crime; but they also disclose certain universal aspects of the human soul. Martinez' report, at the most literal level, purports to be an objective review of these individuals, and of the actions by which their identities are defined. It reveals the secret life of an underworld which develops in parallel with the developing city. But the world of poverty and violence which Martínez reconstructs in this account turns out to be nothing more or less than the struggle with which he is most familiar, the struggle of man against the contradictions inherent in his very existence. And so, Martínez arrives at the discovery that no matter how adverse the conditions, each individual bears within himself the need to overcome the sense of emptiness inherent in his day-to-day living. It is the ripening of this awareness which brings him closer to the figure of Américo Arlequín.

The whole process occurs as if José Martínez had to suffer some kind of purification through pain and horror; having been through his own hell, he reaches the cathartic shock which leads him to the benefits of creativity. The writing of the Relato is his necessary

first step into the creative orbit, and it is clear that his creative potential, once awoken, will henceforth demand its fulfilment through writing. Hence his association with Américo Arlequín and with his novel. Indeed, the displacement of the centre of attention to Américo Arlequín which now occurs, takes place because José Martínez's own narrative demands it. Moreover, there are strong indications that Arlequín is, in fact, an alter ego of the narrator. The sense that their consciousness is more or less coterminous is especially clear in the description of a meeting between the two men, presented in the Relato under the sub-heading Revisa el material.

"Américo Arlequín revisaba el material en un ancho escritorio repleto de todos los papeles que allí habían de llegar... Pensaba - es un decir - le llegaban imágenes sobre los momentos de su llegada a la ciudad, en como había gastado su juventud y se encontraba ahora - en la raya de los cincuenta - y con las manos vacías. Unos libros de poesía escritos hace mucho tiempo y el eterno proyecto de la Misa de Arlequín."(9)

The very fact that Arlequín, presented to us with this measure of inwardness, forms part of the narrative produced by Martínez, tends to suggest that he may be no more than a projection of the latter. The identification is supported by the similarities between the two: both are about fifty years of age; both are afflicted by the same sense of frustration and the same need to overcome it; more importantly still, both are writers. The introduction of Arlequín can be seen as a further strategy on Martínez's part for overcoming the absurd reality he has been condemned to bear. Or possibly,

Arlequín only stands for Martínez's aspirations, what he would like to be, but is not. Certainly, there is contrast as well as closeness between them. Arlequín is an opposite, an inverse reflection of José Martínez; where the latter is an alienated figure, dependent on the whims of the others, the former is free of such contingency - to the point, indeed, of being anarchic. Martínez must endure his destiny; Arlequín preserves the hope that his can somehow be changed.

Yet Arlequín himself is in the grip of a compulsion - a compulsion, precisely, to create. This way of dealing with his own contradictions is to project them into an explosion of different identities, the raw material of his novel. The main character of La Novela de Arlequín is, needless to say, a literary creator, a writer. His activity then, transcends reality. But the effects of its doing so is to throw into relief the unreality of all that it achieves:

"Arlequín se considera semejante a uno de esos juegos en los cuales hay una caja que contiene otra caja donde viene otra que contiene una menor y esta última guarda otra mas chica, hasta llegar a una mínima caja que nada contiene."(10)

Arlequín knows that what he does is false. But he knows it just so strongly - and no more - that he is impelled to attempt a new escape, by way of new literary performance. And so on, indefinitely. The sequence of his identities and projections is like a set of Russian dolls, where each doll hides another one: the quest for the former reality is never ending.

Arlequín's game takes as its starting point the memories of his childhood, his home town, his mother, all this together with his memories of more recent times, becomes simultaneously Arlequín's novel and the concrete form assumed by his attempts at escaping. Arlequín confronts his phantoms in this way because he knows that

"... está viva la vida como un espectáculo ya conocido y, sin embargo, destinado a realizarse en muy diversas maneras. Como una sinfonía. Como un ballet. Como la sabia mezcla de colores que crea un pintor. Como una cantata. Como un relato. La vida siempre, los mismos motivos, temas idénticos."(11)

Knowing that this is the way to carry on his own performance, he evokes his memories; for him, this evocation means the reconquest of his self, of his origins. On his mother's side these incorporate him within the ethnic plurality of his land; on the other side, his history rests upon the image of that Giacomo Arlequín, an itinerant pedlar or puppet-master whose single legacy to his son has been the name of Arlequín and with it the inexhaustible possibility of creating fantasies. These elements define the identity which the young Arlequín adopts. He gives scope to his imagination, playing with exotic patronymics (Alekin or Halekino) or playing at being a famous painter or a conquistador. All these are strategies to deny the lack of heritage, the uncertainty as to what Giacomo Arlequín really was. Arlequín's son owes his origin to fantasies; thus he can be a puppet-master's son, a gypsy, a nobleman from the Tyrol, because ever since Américo Arlequín was a child "le gustaba disfrazarse y

disfrazar las cosas." And as he does so, his world becomes a fictional one, taking whatever shape is dictated by random chance. Creativity is for him a vital function, like breathing. Understanding that this is to be the main purpose of his own spectacle, Arlequín presents himself: "Soy Arlequín y camino las calles de mi ciudad y abro las puertas de la noche."

It is this which gives life to Arlequín: his capacity at every moment to assume a new mask. His series of roles encompasses Arlequín^{the}defeated Indian, the poet Dante or Garcilaso, Arlequín the conqueror, Arlequín the preacher, all of them different dimensions of his single image and his whole life, because:

"Ha aprendido a provocar apariencias ... Del escenario se le ha corrido a la vida la facultad del mimo y danzarín, de actor y recitante. Me he sentido obligado a ser mis personajes. He repetido siempre un texto."(11)

The shift of verbal person here marks the essential equivocation which this involves. Quite knowingly - and this is the paradox - Arlequín sets out to deceive himself, to forget that behind each of his characters there is nothing but another disguise, to hide the implacable void that underlies existence.

The internal structure of the novel is defined by the motif of the quest, or search, which can be followed throughout the whole work. This quest, taking the form of an endless series of different performances, enacts for the reader the narrator's own metaphysical

dilemma.

The two parts of the novel have in common a sense of failure, and the need, experienced by the characters, to escape from that failure. These elements will be essential to the development of the quest. But it is given its definitive shape by the maturing process which is undergone by José Martínez.

To give an account of this search implies a separate treatment of the two sources of momentum in the work; the one deriving from José Martínez, and the other from Arlequín. Initially, it is José Martínez's work which is presented, because it represents an early stage in the formation of his consciousness. The nature of that consciousness, indeed, is the true subject of El Relato de José Martínez.

José Martínez can make only one affirmation on his own behalf, and it is this:

"Tengo que decir (y este será tal vez el nudo de mi relato, la razón de haberme dedicado a llenar estas páginas) que no existo."(13)

His knowledge of himself during the past fifty years presents his life as undermined by the fulfilment of commitments which have made of him nothing but a thing, an instrument of others. This awareness plunges him into such a state of anguish that he can hardly summon up the necessary effort of will to overcome this situation. Having to live at all becomes for him a hateful circumstance, which he attempts to avoid by means of drunkenness. This confronts him

with a conclusive failure, because all that drunkenness can do is to confirm the uselessness of his efforts. It does not abolish his anguish; if anything, it renders this even more intense, and throws his lack of identity into yet more unbearable relief. He comes to see his own self as an alien object, *lost* among duties, fatherland, family. However, he still attempts one further possible escape, by stepping back into his memories, and reflecting:

"Cualquiera podría señalar que las bases de una vida están siempre colocadas entre las nieblas de la infancia y es de primera importancia señalar las relaciones familiares. El padre, los hermanos - ya lo he dicho - son para mí absolutamente repugnantes y despreciables. A una hermana recuerdo como semejante a una langosta verde; a un saltamontes patojo. La madre... no sé qué decir de ella. Se murió pronto y no había existido."(14)

Even in this he meets with no success, but merely confirms his rootlessness and inability to share in even the most elementary nexus of family love. And so he is brought to the conviction that there is nothing in himself to be rescued, but that there may be something to be invented. It is this belief which impels José Martínez to experience the desire of seeing his impressions in print. He seeks to organise dreams, experiences and thoughts; to form, as it were, a possible image of his life.

In order to achieve an intelligible presentation of the factual element in all this, José Martínez holds on, for the moment, to his alienated identity, but steps back from the picture, to disclose the

process of wearing down which has brought him to his present state. The outstanding feature of that disclosure is the strong implication that the deep feeling of rootlessness experienced by José Martínez is no private eccentricity, but an inherently human experience. In support of this belief, José Martínez commits himself to disclosing, together with his own self-portrayal, the stories of others who, like him, wander about the city trying to forget their anguish. Within this frame, and with the whole city as a background, Martínez produces a picture which reveals his antecedents as well as the successive stages of his self-destruction. To express his similarity with the other characters, José Martínez devises a nocturnal scene in which night becomes an accomplice, sharing silence, darkness and, ultimately, nothingness:

"Digo que miraba hace noches la calle solitaria tras el cristal del bar. Un mundo de luces y de sombras tras la luz y sombra del cristal. Igual a muchas otras noches. Pasa un hombre; camina despacio y torpe; busca lo obscuro. Se detiene; mira a un lado y otro; orina - o hace como si orinara - y examina la calle desierta. También espera una sorpresa de la noche. Nada le llega y sigue su camino. El y yo sentimos - al mismo tiempo - cómo se ha apagado la luz de una ventana y cómo la desaparición del cuadrado luminoso ha hecho dar un paso más a la noche. Es más tarde desde que se apagó esa ventana."(15)

This picture, reminiscent of an image in Vallejo's Poemas Humanos (16) points to the eventual outcome of the narrator's quest: it will lead nowhere and find nothing. More immediately, it

expresses an essential element of that quest: the overwhelming presence of that loneliness which is so common to the whole Menesian output. It is this which links José Martínez with that nocturnal walker who was left behind at the end of El Falso Cuaderno... It is the existential emptiness in José Martínez's soul which now brings him close to the unknown figure in the street. The remark that "El y yo sentimos - al mismo tiempo - cómo se ha apagado la luz del ventanal" is Martínez's own affirmation of this closeness. The sense of existential loneliness is the factor which encourages him to deploy all his wit in searching for an ultimate answer to existence. It leads him to become a journalist. It impels him to capture an image of what life is from the movements of others, to observe even himself as a memory, reflected in the depths of a looking-glass.(17) And finally, it enables him to exploit the versatility of this last device in a constant, subtle flux of becoming, in the new and multiple form of disguise which is Américo Arlequín.

In La Novela de Arlequín, the central factor is, again, the notion of the quest. Arlequín realizes that reality cannot provide a suitable answer to his metaphysical uncertainty, and so, in order to cope with his anguish, he turns inwards on himself. To fill the void which underlies his external reality he attempts a literary form whose emptiness can be shaped according to his will. To achieve this, he designs his Novela de Arlequín in which a character engaged in a constant search for his own identity assumes all the possible identities his experience can provide. In this way, the character

keeps up a permanent activity, which moves him away from any attachments related to his immediate reality. Meanwhile, in a parallel movement, a gradual creative process unfolds. It is this latter achievement which enables Arlequín to assume a measure of command over his situation, in the sense that he controls the forms of the imagined life which his characters create.

La Novela de Arlequín demands to be considered as a quest, insofar as its structure is designed as a steady opening out towards new forms, corresponding to new demands of the character Américo Arlequín; it is he who takes the initiative in this game which evolves in an endless series of performances. In each one of his presentations, Américo Arlequín, the eternal actor, embarks on a new phase of the inquiry: life is like a succession of doors, and Arlequín is there to open them. A structure of this sort resembles the labyrinths - those infinite series of passages, at whose end there is always another door waiting to be opened - which are constant features of Borges' cryptic narrative works.(18)

The quest motif defines, in a primary sense, the narrative structure of La Novela de Arlequín. An alternative structure is provided through the ritualistic element in its design. Time and again, life is reformulated in a chain of repetitions, and the effect of this is the focus of our attention on the terms in which Arlequín himself defines the quest:

"La vida de cada quien es una
ceremonia que contiene muchas
diferentes versiones - muchos

distintos destinos - pero cada una de esas formas de la vida se provoca por la presencia del azar."(19)

Random chance is important to this process not just because it generates events, but because of the possibilities of imitation which it offers to Arlequín himself. To the original notion of chance he opposes that of destiny:

"Lo único evidente, lo indestructible, es - para Arlequín - el azar y supone que el azar no es una serie incontrolable de movimientos injustificados, sino por el contrario - un programa sabiamente dosificado, fabricado de acuerdo con las cualidades de cada individuo, para hacer la ceremonia de la vida."(20)

The key word in both of these passages is ceremonia; to assume each moment and internalize it by means of a ceremony is what transforms chance into destiny. Arlequín makes a similar distinction between movement and reality. The latter means, for him, a fundamentally static condition. Movement is the ceremony; movement is a personal destiny, conceived as a steady process of becoming:

"Porque - dice Arlequín - es necesario sentirse muy pequeño, semejante a sí mismo a lo largo de los instantes iguales, para encontrar el azar como presencia extraña frente a la permanente realidad de cada día. Arlequín niega la semejanza consigo mismo porque puede ser cualquier santo, guerrero, poeta, mercader, bandido, y apartar la cercana certeza de la alcoba, del oficio, de los pasos cotidianos. Así el azar es otra materia admirable, apoyo de mil

formas diferentes, para mil vidas
diferentes."(21)

This represents precisely Arlequín's concept of what life is about. Each of his performances may be defined as an operation of chance extended in time, though the temporal dimension has to be understood within the limits which Arlequín himself imposes upon it:

"El tiempo mismo sólo existe en
razón de nuestra aceptación.
¿Cuándo comienza este presente de
hoy? Hace apenas un instante no
existía. Y, sin embargo, puede
haber un presente iniciado hace
miles de años, tendido desde las
brumas del pasado a las neblinas
del futuro."(22)

To sum up, the structure of La Novela de Arlequín repeats, in terms of Américo Arlequín, the pattern of José Martínez's quest. Arlequín's novel represents a ceremony whose content is dictated by chance, and whose aim is to display another way of living, in which it is possible for Man to master his experience. The repetition of images and dreams sets up the pattern of a ritual, and it is this which reinforces Arlequín's efforts to challenge José Martínez' failure. While Martínez is doomed to die, Arlequín, opposing his own existence, triumphs since:

"Su costumbre de amistad con las
mentiras y los sueños se prolongó a
lo largo de la mocedad, lo acompañó
en los pasos de la madurez, se
extendió en una imagen más allá de
las costas de la Muerte."(23)

The two protagonists of La Misa de Arlequín express two facets

of the same state of consciousness. Both characters are expressions of the same failure: José Martínez, the drunkard and Américo Arlequín, the artist. They are versions of what we have learned to recognize as the typical Menesian character, without hope but still anguished at the consciousness of his own insignificance. This character, who strives for survival, knows that his effort is useless; however, he fights on, finding an object for his action in the realization of his own defeat.

José Martínez expresses this failure in a more sublime and absolute terms, since he cannot arrive at any secure and intelligible version of himself. Yet, in a heroic act of the only kind of self-affirmation left to him, he neglects himself to the extent of achieving total isolation from his immediate environment. In that state of isolation, there are truths that he dares to tell - most importantly on the occasion of the night club when he shouts his denunciation of the dictatorial government and its repression. The acceptance of such a risk sets Martínez apart as both a victim and a hero; he has achieved a detachment from reality which makes him uniquely free in an unfree world. This achievement is linked to another feature of his loneliness, as he himself notes:

"Bien puedo decir que estoy acompañado de personajes más o menos ficticios: igual me da pensar en sombras salidas de un rincón de la vida que en gentes indicadas por el título de un libro. Converso a veces con Madame Bovary, esa dolorosa que terminará suicidándose por haber comprendido mal el amor. Siempre afirmo mi solidaridad por los desgraciados, por los equivocados; me produce muy grande

admiración imaginar como un hombre
puede creer que rozaba el cielo
justamente en el instante de su
caída más profunda y aterradora."

...Así me ha sucedido a mí cuando
he decidido escoger la libertad de
esclavizarme en esta absurda forma
de existencia."(24)

It is clear that the character is totally aware of his choice, and this makes his situation yet more heroically painful. It becomes the expression of a rebellion to which he is committed even in spite of himself. With such an attitude, he is able to claim that at least he is the one responsible for his present state. Though his situation attracts social pressures against him, these do not undermine his decision to face the challenges of existence. That is why, once José Martínez has realized that drunkenness too has failed to conceal the emptiness of his acts, he makes one more further attempt to preserve himself from the annihilation that threatens him. This new attempt is represented by Américo Arlequín, who undertakes the commitment of carrying out Martínez's challenge to his fate. Subtly, Américo Arlequín imposes his own characteristic ambiguity upon Martínez and, in so doing, begins to establish an order in which reality - the reality of his own fictions - can be used to overcome Man's perishable nature.

The two protagonists of La Misa de Arlequín have to be seen as antithetical figures. While José Martínez belongs to an eminently human condition, Arlequín's life emerges precisely as a sublimation of that human state. While Martínez's world is one of all too actual dread and misery, Arlequín's world is made of memories and fantasies.

This contrast serves to underline the total failure to which Man is doomed, in the sense that no matter what strategies are devised to escape it, the void will always be there, in the background, waiting. For Arlequín's achievement is based upon an endless repetition, and even when this is given a ritual form, it merely reinforces the sense of limitation and inevitability which it is designed to evade. The escape from time, then, is nothing but another illusory game of Américo Arlequín; the ritual turns out to be one more hopeless attempt of Arlequín, as Everyman, to overcome his doomed existence.

CONCLUSIONS

Our approach to Meneses' narrative form reveals him as a close observer of his chosen area of reality. From his earliest works onwards, Meneses pursues a consistent line of conduct in connection with his treatment of factual data. Observation and analysis are the defining characteristics of his method and what lies at the centre of his inquiry as the most absorbing phenomenon of all is the relationship between man and truth. The totality of his exploratory approach is orientated in that direction trying to establish an understanding of the problem by every possible means. In his quest for a valid answer he has observed men of all sorts and conditions and has devoted himself to finding out the constant elements of such relationship. His survey shows the recurrence of a subordination of man to time and this is a discovery which signals the most humiliating feature of the human condition: *man's* inability to determine his own fate.

The response to this insight then takes the form of another search - the pursuit of a formula which would allow man to transcend his condition. All this presupposes an activity whose expression in Meneses' literary creation is realized in forms which time and again describe the terms of the basic human condition. To this end, he establishes patterns of association, evokes memories, or invents real or imaginary experiences in a life's work which grows steadily more complex as the search itself becomes more urgent.

These efforts, however, which are apparent at every stage of the writer's life, issue at the end of the whole inquiry, in a gesture of total impotence, the acceptance that his search has been nothing more than an actor's heroic gesture - like life itself or like the image of Arlequín - endlessly projecting his personal performance as the ritual of Life and Death.

Américo Arlequín is the result of the process which originally started with that distant Juan del Cine mentioned by Meneses in his *Antología*. The theme of knowledge and his search for the truth, have been a constant throughout his works. Such a search can be traced from his "Early Stories" and "Variants of Defeat" where it becomes a basic feature of his literary production. At that early stage the characters already manifest their inability to transcend what appears to be a tragic destiny. The overwhelming reality of those works is that Man is a foredoomed creature. Later works assembled under the title "Personal Destinies" constitute the confirmation of that earlier intuition. Here we find the lives of Federico Montesdeoca, El duque, José Vargas, Julio Alvarado and Juan de Dios Piñango representing Meneses' attempts to develop a formula to vindicate them. Man's life, however, proves to be an enormous absurdity which persists and invades the personality of José Prados, even though he refuses to mention this in an explicit manner.(1)

In order to escape from the certainty of fatality, there is the recourse of the mirror whose reflection reveals another dimension discovered by José Prados, the poet, as "the only possibility of deluding oneself and others" by creating forms out of the shadows

in the mirror. The discovery of reflected images marks a turning point in Meneses' narrative and leads him to further related explorations such as those found in La mano junto al muro and later, at its highest expression, in El falso cuaderno de Narciso Espejo.

Until now, through this series of stages which emerges as a process of learning, Meneses has experimented with forms that reality has shown as incapable of providing channels of evasion. Because, like his characters, Meneses too has grown old, the attitude of attentive witness - like the narrator in his own works - turns against him and imposes the harsh reality upon him. He too is a man, and evasion for him is also a futile act. This reaffirmation is underlined in El destino es un dios olvidado and materialized in the grotesquely comic figure of Américo Arlequín who assumes a ritual in order to survive - "Harlequin's Mass" - and reconstitutes himself as just one more lie, by stating

"Por ser Américo Arlequín, por ser un personaje de novela, puedo seguir diciendo mentiras o verdades. Por ser Américo Arlequín estoy vivo, escribiendo más allá de todos los límites."

APPENDIX I
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WORKS BY GUILLERMO MENESES. CHRONOLOGY

NOVELS

- | | |
|--------|-------------------------------------|
| 1934 - | Canción de Negros |
| 1939 - | Campeones |
| 1946 - | El mestizo José Vargas |
| 1952 - | El falso cuaderno de Narciso Espejo |
| 1962 - | La misa de Arlequín |

CUENTOS

- | | |
|--------|-------------------------------------|
| 1934 - | La balandra Isabel llegó esta tarde |
| 1938 - | Tres cuentos venezolanos |
| 1948 - | La mujer, el as de oros y la luna |
| 1961 - | Cable cifrado |
| 1968 - | Diez cuentos |

TEATRO

- | | |
|--------|----------------------------|
| 1944 - | El marido de Nieves Mármol |
|--------|----------------------------|

ARTICLES, ESSAYS AND ANTHOLOGIES

- | | |
|--------|---|
| 1954 - | Antología del cuento venezolano (Prologue, selection and notes) |
| 1956 - | Venezuela Album (Texts) |
| 1960 - | Cuento de Venezuela (Article) |

- 1966 - Caracas en la novela venezolana (Selection and notes)
- Hoy en casa leyendo (Lecturas de Miranda). (Prologue, selection and notes)
- 1967 - Muros de Venezuela (Texts)
- Libro de Caracas (Article)
- Espejos y Disfraces (Essay)

APPENDIX II
=====

LUNA (1946)

This is a story whose title refers to the effects of moonlight on Nicolás Malavé, the Indian fisherman. For some time, Nicolás has been feeling an increasing sense of anguish which he has been unable to identify with precision. As time passes, his discomfort intensifies and keeps him in a state of permanent restlessness.

"Había pensado echarse en la hamaca a descansar, había pensado quedarse un rato en la sombra de su cuarto pobre y algo se lo había impedido: hubiera querido dormir un largo rato, con sueño espeso y tranquilizador y esta angustia, silenciosa y quieta como la había donde pescara le mantenía alerta el pensamiento."(1)

His mood is one of instability, strangely responsive to the suggestions contained in the lyrics of a tune or in the natural noises. It is an anxiety which Malavé does not know how to control. As the night progresses and his anguish intensifies, the Indian, in his search for relief, decides to go for a stroll under the full moonlight. This finally brings his crisis to a head, in the form of an erotic outburst which, for a moment, is directed towards the person of his sister Blanca. On this story, Judith Gerendas has made the following comment:

"Es una mezcla de hondo deseo, de angustia, de soledad y de locura junto a una sensualización de la naturaleza. Y, al lado de ello y marginalmente, vemos una dramática y profunda visión del hombre,

frente a lo trágico del erotismo
más primitivo."(2)

In Luna, the central character is not involved in actually doing anything but in wondering about his one and only preoccupation: that undefinable sense of anguish. The story develops that anguish as evolving from the simplicity of a snatch of whistling which refers to the natural elements in the environment; until being identified with the moonlight, it comes to embrace the whole idea of nature.

"Tí Tí Tí
Suenan el silbido entre los gruesos
labios oscuros y se piensa que el
indio está llamando a los peces o a
la sombra o a los brillos de la
tarde tendidos sobre la mar. La
ensenada con quietud que esconde un
profundo pavor desconocido recibe
en su seno ese silbido."(3)

The image of the whistling mediates between the Indian and nature; it appears as a secret code that insinuates an identity, or rather, a synthesis between Man and his natural environment. Nicolás' own behaviour suggests such a synthesis. When in the village, it is true he does not express himself through those 'natural' bird-like cries, but uses instead a 'cultural' medium song. This, however, is a manner of his singing:

"Rezongó, se recostó del portal,
cantó con voz chillona:

'Estando a sotaventado
y esperando de la costa
terrales que siempre soplan
por una casualidad..!(4)

The crude half-formed character of his singing reveals his precarious attachment to the human world of culture. Nicolás' mode

of utterance discloses not an integration but a tension with human reality. In the village, the whistling becomes anguish resolved into song because he feels loneliness and "ni siquiera tiene una mujer".

In Luna, the world is presented in an almost magical form; natural elements are projected in a way transfigured by Man's sensual nature, as reflected in these examples:

"Nicolás Malavé mira hacia el
cielo; entre las ramas del cocal
cercano, revienta - redonda y
desnuda - la extraña flor
llameante, fría, blanca que quema
la infinita serenidad del
cielo."(5)

"La calle enlunada redobla con el
ruido de su carrera, como si mil
pequeños tambores de marfil lo
rodearan gritando su alto tan tan.
La calle enlunada chilla como si
mil pájaros de plumas ardientes lo
rozaran chillando su ti ti ti de
fuego blanco."(6)

The conflict reproduces itself in various forms. A flaming hallucination bursts out creating an atmosphere of madness that reveals the repressed passion hidden in the soul of the Indian Malavé. These forms progress by a process of magnification which is at once freely inventive and directed towards the achievement of a poetical dimension. For instance, the notion of moonlight is enriched by means of an accumulation of associative ideas which transform the original into a complex conceptual totality. As for instance, in this case:

"Y Malavé mira la luna. Redonda
flor, fruta podrida, hoja de plata,
tambor, pezón, pico de pájaro,
ombligo, madre ... El Indio Malavé

chilla."(7)

The result is a gradual displacement of interest from the conflictive subject of the story to its harmonious form, a subtle undermining of the importance of the plot and incident, as these are subordinated to the poetic dimension of the story. In this regard, the richness of language and the play of sensory effects are crucial to the development of the imagery. Visual imagery is the predominant mode as it is shown in the following examples:

"Desde la hora de la siesta ...
Bajo el sol recio del mediodía
caliente remó hacia la azul
ensenada de negra orilla vegetal...
Entonces, la tarde comenzó a
desperzarse con bostezo de
penumbra y temblor de brillos."

"... sobre los ladrillos del zaguán
la luna acuesta el fulgor azulado
de su luz que marca en el suelo la
negra silueta romántica del
pescador."

"... frente al mar que se desliza
en plata vaga, como si fuera de
aire y cristal."

"... sobre el pueblo cae la manta
fría de la luz, que desdibuja los
perfiles en vago azul y hace honda,
negra la sombra de los aleros y de
los árboles."

In parallel with Malavé's inner anguish, light is the element which drives forward the flow of perceptions in which sound and movement reinforce the possibilities of the purely visual impression. Whatever other objects in the landscape may be named, the central motif¹ is the moon. The sensual exaltation of this image achieves such an intensity that it creates an atmosphere of strong erotic

connotations. And this pattern of associations, in which concepts such as instinct, moon, woman are superimposed on one another, eventually serves as the basis for the final metaphor. This last image represents the climax of this process of 'sensualization' (to use the word employed by Judith Gerendas). The scene in the courtyard, when Nicolás Malavé sees Blanca, repeats the equation: instinct - moon - woman, and in that moment, everything that has been undefined anguish, is transferred to the woman's body, and resolved in an explosion of desire:

"Empuja la puerta de su casa.
Grita:
- Blanca! Blanca! Blaaaancaaaa!
Y llega la voz soñolienta de su
hermana. Y llegan los pasos
pequeños de la hermana que se
acerca.

- ¿Que pasa, Nicolás?

- Hermanita...

(Estan los dos en el patio, bañados
de luna, altos sobre el mundo,
rodeados de estrellas hundidos en
luna, rozados por la seda celeste)

- Hermanita...

Miedo de siglos, terror de instinto
y de tabúes, salta en los ojos de
la mujer, hace duro su semblante.
(El brazo potente del indio se
enrosca en el anca redonda)

- ¿Qué es eso, Nicolás?... Respete.

El indio se echa a llorar. Ríe
tambien con risa de loco. Silba su
tí tí tí. Cae al suelo. Queda
quieto, duro como un cadáver, con
sonrisa de luna entre los labios
negros, con luna traidora,
agresiva, dolorosa, clavada en la
verde morenez de su carne.

- ¡Nicolás! ¿Qué te pasa? - hay

cariño, miedo, dulzura en la pregunta.

- Hermanita...

Jadea el indio. (Mil pájaros de pluma de fuego acarician chillando gritos plateados. Mil tambores azuzan con redoble de llama. Mil labios de pájaro vicioso chupan el humo de su carne).

...

De pronto huyen los pájaros de fuego, se callan los tambores llameantes, se apagan anhelantes los encendidos labios.

El indio Malavé, acucillado, apoya la cabeza entre las manos como una estatua de tristeza.

- Hermanita. Déjame un rato quieto
- ¿Qué pasa, Nicolás?
- Perdóname, hermanita.

Tras una nube gruesa, se ha apagado la luna de la costa y del mar."(10)

This dramatic turn in Malavé's behaviour responds to the vehemence of his frustrated instincts exacerbated by the moonlight. And the outburst provides the key to the conflict in Malavé's soul.

There are three linguistic registers of importance in the presentation of this story. In the first place, there is an approach to 'natural language' in expression which make direct, onomatopoeic use of the sounds to be found in nature. The clearest example is the whistled phrase "tí-tí-tí" on which the whole first part of the story turns. Other examples are less obvious; for instance, the "glúglúes apenas musitados del agua..." forming the frame in which the silent activity of the fisherman takes place.

Secondly, there is the language present as a cultural fact and product. Malavé's utterances assume socially conditioned forms at times, yet these are still capable of revealing his inmost being; His singing provides an instance of this: the crudity of his songs discloses the simplicity of his psychology. Again, we have the use of diminutive forms to express affection and intimacy, which is the characteristic form of indigenous language: "Buenas noches, manito." "Vitico Parucho", Hermanita". Yet, such playing with endings of words can suggest the creativity and liveliness of the character: "-Ah! Nicolás, Nicoleta."

The story's third and most widely present level of language is that of the narrator, with its wide ranging use of cultivated forms, through which the aesthetic achievement of Luna, , is primarily made possible.

N O T E S

NOTES TO CHAPTER I

1. José Balza, "Guillermo Meneses, al otro lado de los espejos" in El Diario de Caracas, 27 December 1978, pp. 16-17
2. Guillermo Meneses, Antología. Diez cuentos (Monteavila, Caracas, 1968), p.8
3. Ibidem, pp. 11-12
4. José Balza, Revista Imagen, 15-29 February, 1968, No. 19, p. 4
5. Kalinina Ortega, El Nacional (Section C), Caracas 18 September, 1976
6. Guillermo Meneses, Espejos y Disfraces: 4 Textos sobre Arte y Literatura. (Editorial Arte, Caracas, 1977) p.7
7. See Jean P. Sartre, "Presentación de Los Tiempos modernos" in ¿Que es Literatura? (Editorial Losada, Buenos Aires, 1976) pp. 10-13. In this respect, Meneses adopts a Sartrean vision and projects it within his own perspective.
8. Guillermo Meneses, Espejos y Disfraces, pp. 11-12
9. See Judith Gerendas, La Misa de Guillermo Meneses (Ediciones de la Biblioteca, Caracas, 1969), p. 24 where it is said:- "Fluir de la conciencia, metáforas insólitas, adjetivación audaz, tono poético, pero de una poesía de lo más crudo de la vida, confluencia de lo exterior y de lo interior dentro del personaje, naturalidad y gran fuerza expresiva y monólogo interior caracterizan este cuento de 1936, admirablemente construido.
10. Guillermo Meneses, El Falso Cuaderno de Narciso Espejo, (Editorial Monteavila, Caracas 1972), p. 474.

NOTES TO CHAPTER II

1. Guillermo Meneses, Diez cuentos ("Adolescencia"), (Editorial Monteavila, Caracas, 1968), p. 24

2. Ibidem, p. 25
3. Ibidem, p. 34
4. Ibidem, p. 15
5. Ibidem
6. Ibidem
7. Ibidem, p. 16
8. Ibidem, p. 17
9. Ibidem, p. 18
10. Ibidem, p. 26
11. Ibidem, p. 26
12. Ibidem, p. 32-3
13. See Guillermo Meneses, La Misa de Arlequín (Publicaciones del Ateneo, Caracas, 1962), pp.543-546. The idea is suggested by Meneses' mention of the heroines of the poets Garcilaso and Dante for whom the woman represents a source of love and strength as well as one of guidance and maturity.
14. Guillermo Meneses, Op. Cit., ("Adolescencia"), pp.22-3
15. Ibidem, p. 19
16. Ibidem ("La Balandra Isabel llegó esta tarde"), p.42
17. Ibidem
18. Ibidem
19. Ibidem, p. 43
20. Judith Gerendas, La Misa de Guillermo Meneses, pp. 10-11
21. Ibidem ("La Balandra..."), p.58
22. Ibidem, p. 35
23. Ibidem, p. 36
24. Ibidem, pp. 38-39
25. Ibidem, p. 40
26. Ibidem, p. 37

27. Ibidem, p. 50
28. In his El Mestizo José Vargas, Guillermo Meneses writes:- "El agua esta roja y tibia como sangre amorosa y esencial" ... "En el cielo, cuya dulzura puede sentirse como cariño de mujer, pone la luna su escudo y su flor; en la carne de la arena en los hilos de la red, en la corteza de la carne humana, se mezclan batallando la luna y el día que va a nacer." (p. 331) In his short story "Luna" Meneses also plays with the associations that attribute to the moon an intense sensual connotation. Judith Gerendas, in her "Misa de Meneses..." registers this as a form of "fetichismo de la Naturaleza".
29. Alicia Segal, "Letania del esclavo." in Cinco Novelas by Guillermo Meneses (Editorial Monteavila, Caracas, 1972)
30. Guillermo Meneses, Cinco Novelas, (Canción de Negros), Ibidem, p. 21
31. Ibidem, p. 25
32. Ibidem, p. 71
33. Ibidem, p. 73
34. Ibidem, p. 42
35. Ibidem, p.56
36. Ibidem, p. 21
37. Ibidem, p. 31
38. Ibidem, p. 35
39. Ibidem, p. 49
40. Ibidem, p. 23
41. This is a typically Venezuelan popular rhythm whose outstanding characteristic is its gaiety and liveliness.
42. Guillermo Meneses, "Canción de Negros..." Op. Cit. p. 23
43. Ibidem, p. 36
44. Ibidem, p. 96
45. Ibidem, p. 40

46. Ibidem

47. Ibidem, p. 112

NOTES TO CHAPTER III

1. Guillermo Meneses, Antología ("Borrachera"), p. 59

2. Ibidem, p.60

3. Ibidem, p.61

4. Ibidem, p.61

5. Ibidem, pp.60-1

6. Ibidem, p.62

7. Ibidem

8. Ibidem, p.63

9. Ibidem

10. Ibidem

11. Ibidem

12. Guillermo Meneses, Cinco Novelas ("Campeones"), p.116

13. Ibidem, p. 117

14. Ibidem

15. Ibidem, p. 120

16. Ibidem, p. 130

17. Ibidem, p. 118

18. Ibidem, p. 118

19. Ibidem, p. 177

20. Judith Gerendas, Op.Cit., p. 36

21. Guillermo Meneses, ("Campeones") Op.Cit., p.193

22. Judith Gerendas, Op. Cit., p. 47

23. Guillermo Meneses ("Campeones") Opus Cit. p. 115

24. Ibidem, p. 115
25. Ibidem, p. 116
26. Ibidem
27. Ibidem, p. 122
28. Ibidem, p. 124
29. Ibidem, p. 203
30. Ibidem, p. 211
31. Ibidem, p. 209
32. Ibidem, p. 112
33. Ibidem, pp. 125-208
34. See how the poet Nicolas Guillen also registers the imposition of the foreign elements:

 "Un club cubano de béisbol:
 Primera Base: Charles Little
 Segunda Base: Joe Cobb
 Catcher: Samuel Benton
 Short Stop: James Wintergarden
 Pitcher: William Bot
 Files: Wilson, Baker, Panther,
 Sí, señor.
 Y menos mal
 El cargabates: Juan Guzmán.
 (Poem "Cual tiempo pasado fue peor" in Nicolas Guillen's Tengo, (Montevideo, 1967), p. 31
35. Guillermo Meneses, Opus Cit. ("Campeones"), p. 204
36. Ibidem, p. 158

NOTES TO CHAPTER IV

1. Guillermo Meneses, Antología ("El Duque"), p. 94
2. Ibidem, p. 93
3. Ibidem, pp. 92-93
4. Ibidem, p. 95
5. Ibidem

6. Julio Miranda, Proceso a la Literatura Venezolana (Ediciones U.C.V.), p. 177
7. We have already discussed this on Chapter II
8. Guillermo Meneses, Antología, p. 92
9. Julio Miranda, Op. Cit., p. 178
10. Guillermo Meneses, El Mestizo José Vargas, p. 267
11. Ibidem, p. 365
12. Ibidem, pp. 241-242
13. Ibidem, p. 328
14. Ibidem, pp. 334-5
15. Guillermo Meneses, Antología ("Un destino Cumplido"), Opus Cit., p. 102
16. Ibidem, p. 104
17. Ibidem, p. 108
18. Ibidem, p. 108
19. Ibidem, p. 147
20. Guillermo Meneses, Antología ("Alias El Rey"), pp. 115-16
21. Ibidem, p. 121
22. Ibidem, p. 123
23. Ibidem, p. 138
24. Guillermo Meneses, Antología ("Tardío regreso a través de un espejo"), p. 140
25. Ibidem, p. 139
26. Ibidem, p. 143
27. Ibidem, p. 143
28. Ibidem, p. 147
29. This is a short story published by Meneses in Elite, 1934, to which he refers in the introduction to his Antology.
30. Guillermo Meneses, Opus Cit. ("Tardío regreso...") p. 139

31. Ibidem, p. 160.

NOTES TO CHAPTER V

1. Guillermo Meneses, Antología ("La mano junto al muro") p. 161.
2. Jose Balza, "Guillermo Meneses al otro lado de los espejos" Diario de Caracas, p. 16
3. Guillermo Meneses, Opus Cit. ("La mano junto al muro"), p. 168
4. Ibidem, p. 168
5. Ibidem, p. 175
6. Ibidem, p. 169
7. Jose Balza, Opus Cit. p. 16
8. Guillermo Meneses, Opus Cit. ("La mano..."), p. 161
9. Ibidem, pp. 161-170
10. Ibidem, p. 162
11. Ibidem, p. 162
12. Ibidem, pp. 162-3
13. Ibidem, p. 162
14. Ibidem, p. 161
15. Meneses is, indeed, the first to approach the narrative fact from the perspective of a multiple narrator as well as the use of different and simultaneous temporal instances. He was also the first in demanding an active participation of the reader in his approach to the novel.
16. It is an "anti-novel" in the sense that El falso cuaderno de Narciso Espejo is a novel that looks at itself, calls itself into question, is destroyed and reinvented - thus breaking the mould of the traditional novel.
17. Guillermo Meneses, Opus Cit. ("El falso..."), p. 137
18. Jose Balza, Opus Cit. ("Al otro lado..."), p. 17

19. Guillermo Meneses, Opus Cit, ("El falso...") pp. 379-380
20. Ibidem, p. 369
21. Ibidem, p. 370
22. Ibidem, p. 373
23. Ibidem, pp. 375-6
24. Ibidem, p. 380
25. Jose Balza, Opus Cit. ("Meneses detrás...") p. 17
26. Guillermo Meneses, Opus Cit. ("El falso cuaderno..."), p. 456
27. Ibidem, p. 441
28. Ibidem, p. 435
29. Ibidem, p. 369
30. Ibidem, p. 373
31. Ibidem
32. Ibidem, p. 399
33. Ibidem
34. Ibidem, p. 455
35. Salvador Tenreiro, "Teorías de los personajes menesianos" in Letras, Caracas, 1976, pp.32-33
36. Guillermo Meneses, Opus Cit. ("El falso..."), p. 382
37. Ibidem, p. 428
38. Ibidem, p. 380

NOTES TO CHAPTER VI

1. Guillermo Meneses, Opus Cit. ("El destino es un dios olvidado), p. 187
2. Ibidem, p. 188
3. Ibidem, p. 188

4. Colin Wilson, The Outsider (Victor Gollancz Ltd., London 1956) p. 89
5. Guillermo Meneses, La misa de Arlequín, p. 477
6. Ibidem, p. 478
7. Ibidem, p. 486
8. Ibidem, p. 531
9. Ibidem, p. 522
10. Ibidem, p. 568
11. Ibidem, p. 563
12. Ibidem, p. 549
13. Ibidem, p. 485
14. Ibidem, p. 487
15. Ibidem, p. 482
16. See Cesar Vallejo, Obras Completas, "Poemas Póstumos considerando en frío, imparcialmente", p. 591
17. See Octavio Paz's, poem "Libertad bajo palabra" in his collection Espejo (Mexico, 1934):
 "Frente a los fuegos fatuos del espejo
 mi ser es pira y es ceniza
 suspira y es ceniza,
 y ardo y me quemo y resplandezco y miento
 un yo que empuña, muerto
 una daga de humo que le finge
 la evidencia de sangre de la herida,
 esto es y un yo, mi yo penúltimo,
 que solo pide olvido, sombra, nada,
 final mentira que lo encienda
 y quema.

 De una máscara a otra
 hay siempre un yo penúltimo que pide
 y me hundo en mi mismo y no me toco.
 ...
18. See for instance, Jorge L. Borges' Ficciones and El Aleph, (Buenos Aires, 1944 and 1949, respectively), passim
19. Guillermo Meneses, Opus Cit. ("La misa de Arlequín"), p. 559
20. Ibidem, p. 559

21. Ibidem, p. 559
22. Ibidem, p. 559
23. Ibidem, p. 536
24. Ibidem, p. 494

NOTES TO APPENDIX II

1. Guillermo Meneses, Antología. Diez Cuentos ("Luna"), p. 76
2. Judith Gerendas, "La misa de Meneses", p. 30
3. Guillermo Meneses, Opus Cit. ("Luna"), p. 73
4. Ibidem, p. 76
5. Ibidem, p. 76
6. Ibidem, p. 83
7. Ibidem, p. 83
8. Ibidem, pp. 74, 76, 78 and 79
9. Ibidem, pp. 83-84

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