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**Cuba, Crisis, Crime and Police: The Panoptic View of
Leonardo Padura Fuentes' Detective Novels**

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The historicity of lawlessness has been broadly discussed by philosophers and scholars¹, as has also been the case with the detective novel's use as a means of social contestation and political resistance². What I would like to contribute through this article is a study of the inter and intra-social subjectivity produced within the liminal space created by the transitional historical moments of fin de siècle Cuba and of the incorporation of postmodernist narrative esthetics by Leonardo Padura Fuentes the Mario Conde detective novels.

A native of Havana, Mario Conde is a product of his environment and time. He is a self-sufficient entity who lives the conflicts of his moment and generic affiliation, and who is inescapably entangled by the myriad of circumstances that define each case and novel. He is a loner and a lonely man, a non-conformist, a hardened drinker and smoker, and a lover of good books and food. Unlike previous Cuban detective novel protagonists, Mario Conde is both human and a universal figure. He is one of those rare literary characters that manage to escape the particular circumstances defined by generic and plot limitations, to undertake a life richer than that drawn out initially for him by the author. The police lieutenant's life has been defined as a collection of personal memories, but these have also recorded the collective pulse of a time and a nation as they awaken to the post-industrial modernity that overtook them. The emblematic year of 1989³ serves as backdrop to the first four novels, collectively known as the *cuatro estaciones*. By then, both the 36-year old detective and his country seem to have fallen directly into all of the social, economic and political traumas that such an impending sudden historical shift as the end of the Soviet era could create.

¹ Karl Marx is but one of the best examples the former, and Josefina Ludmer one of the latter.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, Georg Lukács, Michel Foucault and Guilles Deleuze have published extensively on this subject, but one must not overlook the authors themselves who often describe their work in these terms (see the critical writings of R. Chandler, G.K. Chesterton, J.L. Borges, A. Bioy Casares, R. Piglia, I.P. Taibo II, and L. Padura Fuentes himself).

³ This year was marked by two major 'Causa' trials –or General Council of Judiciary trials –of corruption at the highest levels of government, by the fall of the Berlin Wall, and by the official declaration of the *período especial en tiempos de paz*.

Undeniably, revolution is about change, and change implies contestation with tradition. An institutionalized revolution, such as Cuba's⁴ that plays upon the essential dualities of man –of a search for meaning and the infinite –in order to sustain its political and ideological relevance must produce not only revolutionary moral tenets but also culture. However, in the attempt to create a new society and mores, the Cuban Revolución promoted and demanded that the individual encounter and dialogue with a historical newness that existed in the beyond of the past-present continuum⁵ it initially rose to challenge. But the process of breaking with the past and the creation of a new narrative of truth, forced not only a radical revision of the historical basis for the prevalent ethical judgment, but also unwittingly opened up a parenthetical space within this new metaphorical aesthetic of time and history⁶. In short, the nostalgic moment and the quest for an insurgent act of cultural creation unwittingly highlighted the very moment of transit that the Revolución was trying to displace. Lieutenant Mario Conde, protagonist of Leonardo Padura Fuentes's detective novels, inhabits such a moment of transit and exploits it.

Though initially thought out as the protagonist of only four novels, Mario Conde has transcended the conceptual limits of his creator⁷. After the turbulent year of the *cuatro estaciones*, the character went into retirement. Nevertheless, he was revived a few years later by Padura Fuentes, and kept investigating on an ad hoc basis for the same Central de Investigaciones for which he formerly worked as situations, both personal and historical, demanded it. The aforementioned series is composed –in chronological order –by *Pasado perfecto*, *Vientos de cuaresma*, *Máscaras*, and *Paisaje de otoño*, written all between 1990 and 1997; their publication was followed by the appearance of *Adiós Hemingway & La cola de la serpiente*⁸ in 2001, and lastly by *La niebla del ayer*, published in 2005.

Inasmuch as the four first titles were conceived as a group thematically, structurally and temporally from the onset, let us examine their narratives together. *Pasado perfecto* introduces Mario Conde to the world at the beginning of 1989. In this first novel, he is called on to solve the disappearance of a former prep-school acquaintance that is now a high functionary in the Ministry of Industry. The investigation leads to the discovery of his former colleague's double life and of his murder at the hands of a higher official from the Ministry who was trying to cover up the former's illegal dealings with a foreign investor and stop him from fleeing Cuba. Subsequently, *Vientos de cuaresma* recounts lieutenant Conde's investigation of the murder of a young teacher in his former prep school, which apparently involves drugs, jineterismo, and –again –institutional corruption. Laid bare are the generational differences between Mario's youth and the new generation of teenagers

⁴ The permanent nature of the *Revolución* is similar to that of Mexico. And until recently the development of Mexico's detective novel could –and arguably, still can –be characterized in parallel terms to its Cuban counterpart. See *Crimes Against Persons, Crimes Against The State: Contemporary Detective Fiction in Mexico and Cuba* by P. Braham.

⁵ Homi Bhabha discusses the aesthetic image of literature and the idea of the 'ethical time of narration' in *The Location of Culture*.

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas discusses this parenthetical space and time in "Reality and Its Shadows", an article within *Collected Philosophical Papers*.

⁷ In an unpublished interview, Padura Fuentes states that 'Mario Conde was only meant to live that transcendental year of 1989'. It was at the behest of a Brazilian editor that the author brought him back to life in 2001.

⁸ Interestingly, *La cola de la serpiente* was re-written or rather re-worked after each of the books in the *cuatro estaciones* was published but remained unpublished, which explains some of the stylistic inconsistencies and contradictions in this text. I have discussed this short story's interesting genesis in the aforementioned interview with the author.

who now attend his former pre-universitario and the social inconsistencies and dilemmas of the 1990's. *Máscaras* –plausibly the best written of the four novels in this series, and the first to bring the author international acclaim –has a more complex story line: a young bourgeois homosexual from a prominent family is found murdered in Bosque de la Habana, dressed up as a woman. Due to the nature of the crime and the young man's lifestyle, Mario Conde meets an old homosexual playwright who has lived the life of a parametrizado artist⁹. The mask motif and its derivative, performance, are the tropes used by Padura Fuentes –and recognized and analyzed by police detective –to unmask the real cause of the crimes in question: Cuban society as a whole.

Through flashback after flashback we follow the recounting of this man's life as the detective follows the clues that will bring him to the culprit. Lastly, *Paisaje de otoño* closes the series with the detective's last official case: solving the homicide of a visiting exile and former high functionary in the National Bureau of Economic Planning and Forecasting who is now an American citizen. Though the motives of corruption and abandonment –and of homecoming –are pursued in the course of the investigation, the crime turns out to be of a purely passionate nature. Interestingly, in the entire series, not one of the crimes is premeditated; they are all spontaneous, products of impulse and reflex under stressful situations.

Due to the cyclical part of *cuatro estaciones* collection, the reader gradually becomes intimately familiar with the lives and history of several key characters in Mario Conde's life. At work, there are Sergeant Manuel Palacios –associate, subordinate and friend –as well as the paternal figure of Major Rangel, whom the lieutenant admires and trusts as friend and director of the Central. Closer to his affective world are el Flaco Carlos and his mother Josefina, both spiritual brother and mother figures to Mario's solitary character; also present are El Conejo, Candito el Rojo, Miki, Andrés, and Tamara. All childhood and pre-universitario friends who often not only help Mario the detective, but also offer their support to Mario el conde. Similarly, all four novels share a stable narrative structure whereby we find the detective at his home –material and spiritual sanctuary –where he is interrupted (usually from a deep alcohol induced reverie) by a phone call that serves to effectively assign him a new case, the investigation of which will be developed and serve as the fulcrum of the story. Both detective and reader will investigate all possible angles of the crime in question, starting with opportunity and working their way back to motivation. This structural and thematic stability both inscribe these novel in, and exploit, the classical detective novel genre. However, in the course of the inquiry an antithetical character to Mario's detective will arise either to motivate him and his inquiry by his personal animosity for this character, by his incompatibility to the lieutenant's values, or in order to justify the former's antipathy for the institutionalized nature of Cuban society.

⁹ The allusion is to a subset of artist who did not enter into the parameters of the *Revolución's* concept of an engaged intellectual. These characteristics were first delineated in Fidel Castro's 1961 *Dentro de la Revolución* speech, and subsequently resulted in the famous *Caso Padilla* of 1971. See *Política cultural de la Revolución Cubana*, various authors.

Besides offering a regenerated police genre within a Cuban context¹⁰ Padura's tetralogía posits a series of sub-themes that aim to overcome the limits of the neopolicial itself and Latin-American postmodern literature in general, as they relate to Cuba. Namely he endeavors to provide supplemental referents to the reader who –due to the very nature of the island's post-revolutionary geopolitical seclusion and exclusion –cannot use his own experience to fill in the gaps and silences in an otherwise unadulterated text. The first of these secondary themes is the progressive evolution of the group of childhood friends as the year moves forward through a double temporal narration that brings together the 1970's and 1989. In essence, this underlying narrative is interwoven in order to chronicle, for the reader, the history of an entire generation raised under the ideals of the Revolución. The second latent motif is a long-lasting and far-ranging internal affairs investigation of corruption within the Central de policía where the lieutenant works. It eventually inculpates colleagues and friends of Mario Conde, not least of which is his mentor and chief, Major Rangel –though not for corruption, but for inaction. This serves as breaking point with an artificial fraternal culture and the reinsertion of Mario Conde back into Cuban society, as the lieutenant retires at the end of the last novel in the *cuatro estaciones*.¹¹

It is noteworthy that the background questioning of the means by which the Cuban state went about consolidating its revolutionary mandate is not an overtly explicit condemnation, or even a contestation, of the regime. Rather, it comes across as a vision originating from the perspective of temporal distance imposed by age and the socio-economic crisis arising from the collapse of socialism in 1989. This is achieved by the growing distancing between Mario Conde and the state he is supposed to help preserve. For it is quite clear that for the lieutenant, at the collective level there is the law (the frame of reference within which he operates) and that justice is an act sought and carried out by the individual, that is to say: he. And there in lies not only his greatest frustration, but also one of the main contributions his cases make to the subtle reformulation of the prevalent sense of order: he makes an unambiguous distinction between unlawful acts and crime, and in so doing transforms the former into a postmodern strategy of resistance. The most straightforward example of this are the different characters who turn their marginalization by the state into a conscious act of independence, force and resistance. In *Máscaras* alone, there is the parametrizado gay playwright who chooses to remain in-siled and silent even when he could have left the Island or rewritten after his official banishment had ended, the gay and travestied son who chooses to commit suicide at the hands of his own father in order to expose him as a fraud to the state he so proudly represents as a diplomat, the black maid of the aforementioned socialist-bourgeois family who gives Mario Conde the clues that finally solve the case, etc. Then, there are those transgressions, delitos, that are tolerated by the detective –and seemingly everyone else –as necessary acts of survival in a socialist society where crime is no longer only a political phenomenon,

¹⁰ Padura Fuentes himself has stated that more than challenging the 'old school' detective novel's ideo-esthetic structures, he is trying to show the dark sides of a society that has lost its way in the road from underdevelopment to globalization; to show that now everyday existence is full of violence, drugs, crimes of State, repression and corruption at all levels of Cuban society. He has tried to show how these elements have marked the character of a society fearful for its own security and future. See Padura Fuentes, *Modernidad, posmodernidad y novela policial*.

¹¹ Interestingly, we discover at the same time that it was the detective himself who has 'written' all four novels as *Paisaje de otoño* ends with the writing of 'the story of a man and his friends, before and after all of the [current] disasters' which he decides to entitle, *Pasado perfecto*. (259)

but a by-product of the revolutionary discourse of a naïve and dogmatic state. The delito affecting the detective most directly is the inexplicable procurement of foodstuff by Josefina, the mother of his best friend El Flaco Carlos. She resolves¹² the nourishment conundrum with unexplained ease. It is never clear whether she trades-for, robs, or buys in the black market the copious provisions Mario Conde and his friends repeatedly consume. The detective, does not seem to seek or need an answer. A more overtly troublesome figure is Candito el Rojo. He is an openly declared cuentapropista, that is a self-styled capitalist entrepreneur who survives by scheming and by participating –albeit marginally –in the underside of Cuban society. Again, it is debatable whether the policeman overlooks and tacitly allows his childhood friend's actions as a way to obtain some sort of leverage when in need of Candito's criminal contacts or because he understands his lack of options in contemporary Cuban society. In any case, Mario taps his friend not only for information but also for the goods and services he can provide. Other examples are legion throughout the Mario Conde sagas.

Of singular importance to the coherence of the narrative plot and the underlying themes in the series, are the figure, history and life of El Flaco Carlos. More than just a brother figure or an alter ego to Mario Conde, he is really the reflection of an entire generation figuratively –and physically –mutilated by an ideologically inconsistent and careless regime¹³. As a youth, Carlos was sent to fight in Angola, an exotic and unknown land and war, only to return crippled and broken. He lives confined to a wheelchair with his mother who dotes on her son with remarkable energy and love, with no known activities other than eating, drinking and sleeping; seemingly awaiting death as best he can. He is not only a physical reminder of the defeats of the Revolución, but also a graphic personification of national decadence and ruin. Through him Mario has a constant reminder of the daily struggle for survival on the island, and –in the last book –a means by which to measure the effects of exile, when Carlos' childhood sweetheart returns from Miami for a visit and wants to see the group and the obese and shattered paraplegic¹⁴ who still loves her.

The aggregative effect of these narrative threads and arguments goes beyond the realistic description of a marginalized part of Cuban society, with all of their struggles and frustrations, it also results in the unambiguous denunciation of the non-marginality of the actual culprits of the crimes. In all instances, the wrongdoer is a powerful and influential functionary in the public sector. Apart from recreating the physical and temporal space of the disenfranchised citizens of the Revolución, the *cuatro estaciones* saga seeks to demonstrate the corruption and opportunism present –and seemingly from the onset –in the highest spheres of revolutionary governmental institutions. In this way, Padura's lieutenant Mario Conde not only

¹² Like the Puerto Rican *bregar*, *resolver* is more than just a strategy of survival, it is a different type of knowing/knowledge. For an interesting perspective on language and social exchanges in the Caribbean, see Arcadio Díaz Quiñones's *El arte de bregar: ensayos*.

¹³ It is interesting to note that the *pre-universitario* period was recounted in an earlier and initially unrelated short story, *Fiebre de caballos*, in which most of the childhood friends' formative years are chronicled. Upon its second edition, and with the recent success of the *cuatro estaciones* in mind, Padura made the Mario Conde connection more evident by rewriting a few passages, to highlight the fact. See the prologue of this second edition.

¹⁴ There is the case of Andrés, who in spite of his elevated social status as a physician, chooses exile –also in the last book of the cycle –but does so in order not to escape a difficult socio-economic situation, but rather to right the wrongs and mistakes he sees in his life, namely the lack of choice and individuality: he wishes to be defined not by his subjectivity as a collective entity but as an individual.

perpetuates the classical hard-boiled imperative of denouncing the corruptive nature of power, but also does from the interstitial space created by the conflicting and now-redefined concepts of crime and justice in the postmodern socialist state.

Three years later, the publication of *Adios Hemingway & La cola de la serpiente* brought Mario Conde back to literary life. The most significant change is the non-official nature of the detective's investigations. In both cases, he is asked to return unofficially to the police force, to help solve unsolvable mysteries. Stylistically, both stories privilege an anthro-sociological narrative in which the city of La Habana and its history are foregrounded, more so than the crimes themselves. The first story is an interesting study in anamnesis that straddles the Batista years and the 1990's present. The second explores the oft-neglected Chinese community and their place in Cuban society, exposing their marginality and irrelevance to the mainstream. In both cases, it is evident that what drives Mario Conde is no longer the written law, but rather his allegiance to an unwritten code of friendship and complicity in the daily struggle for survival. It is evident that these two stories served as thematic break for and stylistic precursor to *La neblina del ayer*. In this novel, Mario Conde –the now self-described *policía sin oficio*, but more aptly labeled 'private investigator when needed' –remains outside the mechanisms of power, he observes them from a distance, a critical distance, and inhabits more fully the daily realities of everyday Cubans. His outside, and yet knowledgeable, view of the police force allows him to take on a more markedly condemnatory tone toward it. He denounces the lies, hypocrisy, and corruption of his once-beloved profession, yet what at first glance seems to be the primary motor of this story is actually secondary to the underlying premise of collective misery that in this book is what Mario Conde knows from the inside. If originally Mario Conde came to be plausible and necessary because of the untimely *periodo especial*, he now exists due to the structural nature of this unending social catastrophe. Previously the setting of the crimes and investigations had, if not merely a decorative function, a non-central role in the story. Here, however, the overtly teichoscopic view of Mario's world and personal space is the foreground of the narrative. The near constant description of current conditions of poverty, hunger, sickness, and overall decadence is relentless. Added to these are the underlying loneliness and frustration of his fellow Cubans, of all classes and –now –generations. As foil to Mario's outsider character we meet the young Yoyi, a fellow second-hand bookseller. Manolo is now relegated partially to being 'one of them'. His new partner in business –and erroneously, crime –, Yoyi, is typical of his generation. He does not remember the pre-revolutionary years, nor does he identify with the glory of the *Revolución*. All he has known are insufficiencies and hardship. To him, the past –Mario's childhood –is not only alien but also dead. He looks for escape in material gain and comfort through the often-illicit commerce of rare books. It is not unimportant to point out that Mario now participates actively in this activity, looking markedly aside and askance at the unethical trafficking carried out by Yoyi, not unlike previously with Candito. In this case, the crime is unimportant insofar as desperation and time are the real culprits. It is obvious that it serves primarily to drive Mario back into the detective business as the crime is the direct result of his new trade in rare books. The murder takes place in the personal library of an exiled magnate, which both second-hand booksellers are mining for books. They are the main suspects and, paradoxically, the only hope to solving the crime. If Mario has changed, so has his narrative function. He is now an agent of hope and truth, not just of law.

By means of a conclusion, let us return to the beginning and remember that Mario Conde is a product of the historical juncture known as the *periodo especial en tiempos de paz*. That his birth as a character of fiction arose as the revalorization of popular culture in Cuba took place thanks to the ideological and cultural demands of an evolving global marketplace, and though the state was troubled at this time by the changing role of the arts in the re-formulation of a Cuban national identity, the previous socialist-revolutionary cultural paradigm that regulated ideo-aesthetic content could no longer function as control mechanism, as it did previously. Mario Conde's detective investigations and Padura Fuentes' narratives could thus explore discursive spaces previously inaccessible within the framework of a revolutionary ideal. Contradictions and philosophical weaknesses could thus be examined and exploited as dramatic resources without engaging the cognitive failures they implied. Curiously, the challenge to the revolution's rigid cultural policies arose once art became more than an autonomous object of social aesthetic resonance and became a commercial commodity and individual form of expression. Furthermore, Mario Conde's investigations and life have marked this very moment when ethical and artistic judgment ceased to coincide and when subservience to the prevalent socio-economic rhetoric weakened to the point of collapse. With the country's turn toward the global marketplace, it seemed that national cultural production was realized primarily for export. Moreover, it can be argued that due to the very nature and dynamism of capitalistic commercial demands, existent governmental controls had no opportunity to think about alternate intellectual and aesthetic politics. This vacuum of control, in the particular setting of *periodo especial* Cuba, facilitated not only the re-inscription but also the relocation and renewal of previous generic traditions such as the detective novel. Padura's detective character, Mario Conde, dialogues with the historical context and content of his life and work, and in so doing redefines the ideological power struggle between reason and understanding as they pertain to justice. By displacing to the background complicated extra-textual factors, and privileging discursive heterogeneity, Mario Conde not only solves crimes, he mostly finds the truth.

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