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It's a Dog's Life: Canine Ethics in Leonardo Padura's *El hombre que amaba a los perros*

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El hombre que amaba a los perros (*The Man Who Loved Dogs*), the title of Leonardo Padura's 2009 novel, is also the nickname that the novel's protagonist Iván Cárdenas Maturell—a frustrated writer and sometime veterinarian's assistant—gives to the elderly Spanish gentleman that he meets walking his borzois on a Havana beach. The man, who introduces himself as Jaime López, is later revealed to be Ramón Mercader, Catalan Stalinist and Leon Trotsky's infamous assassin. Mercader is not the only character who could be identified as a "man who loves dogs," however, as an unusually strong affection for their canine companions unites all three of the novel's protagonists: the exiled Communist Trotsky, his assassin Mercader, and Iván, the aging Mercader's Cuban interlocutor, who will go on to record their interwoven stories. The appearance of dogs at significant moments in the narrative is one of the ways that Padura guides the reader through a complex web of stories and shifting alliances and identities. Yet dogs are not simply a leitmotif in the text, and the emphasis on human affect in Padura's title (the use of the personal "a," not always a requirement when speaking of animals in Spanish) is more than a

coincidence. Rather, the foregrounding of canine-human interactions at certain key moments in the text provides Padura with a context for exploring questions of relation more broadly. If the story of Mercader's murder of Trotsky is a narrative of political engagement (and, ultimately, of political disenchantment), dogs in *El hombre que amaba a los perros* allow Padura to examine the complicated relationship between ethics and politics. The window onto an ethics of interspecies relations gives the reader further insight into the ethical relation between people in the text.

Padura's choice to focus the bulk of his narrative on the intertwined stories of Trotsky and Mercader may seem a departure from his previous books.¹ Best known as the author of a series of detective novels featuring Mario Conde, a Cuban version of the hard-boiled detective, Padura's novels prior to the publication of *El hombre que amaba a los perros* are predominantly Cuban-centered and Cuban-centric, even when they deal with a historical, rather than contemporary, Cuba, as in *La novela de mi vida* (2002).² Guillermina De Ferrari argues that much of Padura's fiction revolves around what she calls the "friendship plot," a term that she uses in reference to post-Soviet Cuban literature to refer to narratives that explore friendship among men "as an affective bond, as a strategic artistic alliance, and....as an ideological trap" (28). Most often the stories of writers (or aspiring writers), for De Ferrari, with a "friendship plot" center on a

¹ *El hombre que amaba a los perros* is neither the first novel nor the first text in Spanish to explore Ramón Mercader's life and his assassination of Leon Trotsky. Padura's compatriot Guillermo Cabrera Infante uses the details of Trotsky's death as the outline for a humorous and highly parodic section of his novel *Tres tristes tigres* (1967), in which he retells Trotsky's assassination in the voice of a series of canonical Cuban writers (José Martí, Lydia Cabrera, Alejo Carpentier, etc.), and the Mexican playwright Sabrina Berman presents a version of the incident in her play *Rompecabezas* (1982). While the best-known novelization of Trotsky's murder may be Spanish/French writer Jorge Semprún's *La deuxième mort de Ramón Mercader* (1969), several novels recounting the incident have also been published in English, among them Bernard Wolfe's *The Great Prince Died* (1959, republished 2012), Mark Van Aken Williams' *The Prophet of Sorrow* (2010), and John P. Davidson's *The Obedient Assassin* (2014). What is notable about Padura's narrative, in addition to the inclusion of Cuba, is that he chooses to tell the story from the perspectives of both Trotsky and Mercader; the other novels seem to be primarily concerned with the assassin's perspective.

² While *La novela de mi vida* does not feature Mario Conde, in the parallel investigation of two possible betrayals, one historic—that of José María Heredia by Domingo del Monte—and one contemporary, it hews to both the crime novel format and the Cuban setting of Padura's Mario Conde novels.

particular personal challenge: the artist/intellectual (or group of intellectuals) must achieve literary or intellectual success while “neither surrender[ing] to the pressures of the government nor betray[ing] any of his friends” (28). This “test,” which the protagonist most often fails, is not only revealing of the relationship between male intellectuals and the revolution but also is fundamental to the structuring of revolution’s social contract. Padura’s earlier crime novels stage the test of the “friendship plot” through his detective Mario Conde’s criminal investigations. Conde is someone whose loyalty—to both friends and long-cherished values—prevents his success. As De Ferrari puts it, “The best way for him to avoid choosing between dignity and prestige is to perpetually postpone the choices and disillusionments that would allow him to mature both socially and affectively” (42). By never actually realizing his fantasies of becoming a writer, Conde never reaches a point where he is forced to choose between personal attachments and intellectual or professional success. As a result, he lives in a state of nostalgia both for what might be and what might have been.

Given the international nature of both its setting and events, the real-life murder of one of the founders of the Bolshevik Revolution by a Soviet-trained Catalan assassin would not appear to conform to the contours of the Cuban “friendship plot.” However, I would argue that *El hombre que amaba a los perros* may in fact be Padura’s most complex exploration of the friendship plot to date, as it uses the parallel stories of Trotsky’s exile and Mercader’s training as an assassin as a broader canvas onto which to trace the connections and contradictions between friendship, loyalty, personal honor, and political and intellectual success. Trotsky and Mercader must navigate both personal and professional loyalties in order to achieve professional (political) success, and there are many times when these demands are in conflict. Most significantly—in terms of the “friendship plot”—their story is also refracted onto and triangulated through that of Iván, Mercader’s Cuban interlocutor. In keeping with the “friendship plot,” Iván is a frustrated writer whose early censorship and censure by the regime has prevented him from realizing his dreams or following creative impulses, even as his friend Dany, whom he once

mentored, has become a writer of some success. When Iván is finally called upon to write—in this case Mercader's story, rather than one of his own invention—he finds himself paralyzed by questions of ethics, personal safety, and even political loyalty.

Dogs provide another important prism through which Padura explores and expands the friendship plot. Taken together, Trotsky's, Mercader's and Ivan's stories act as foils for each other: the excess that marks Mercader's and Trotsky's antagonistic political actions stands in sharp contrast to Iván's caution and reticence, a function of his efforts at self-preservation. While the parallels and connections between these three men are themselves significant, tracing the way in which they relate to dogs offers another way of reading this narrative. An ability to love dogs—the moments when the three men actively seek to engage with the dogs that are present—reveals the limits of the political and of political selves. These moments of canine companionship expose the conflicts that arise between politics and ethics, and the very personal costs that result from political decisions. For all three men, dogs are friends that nevertheless disrupt the “friendship plot,” complicating the borders of political engagement, ethical behavior, and the construction of a core ethical self.

Of Dogs and Men

In understanding the difference between humans and animals, the ways in which humans have declared their difference from other animals and insisted upon this division seems to have been of most importance. As Jacques Derrida observes in *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, “the animal is a word, is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and authority to give to the living other” (Derrida I.1). The assertion of animals' otherness often becomes not merely an expression of difference but also an affirmation of human superiority. Since at least the Classical era, philosophers and scientists have explored a variety of ways to understand and explain what makes humans human, and what makes animals “less-than-human.” One starting point for scholars seeking to understand what makes humans different from other animals has been the differences between human and animal communication.

Beginning with Aristotle, philosophers as diverse as Descartes, Kant, Lacan, and, most notably, Heidegger have all argued that humans are different from (and superior to) other animals because animals lack the ability to communicate through language (Derrida 3).³

The division between human life and animal life has come to have implications for the definition of political sovereignty. In *Homo Sacer*, Giorgio Agamben, returning to Aristotle, distinguishes between the Greek terms *zoe*, “the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods),” and *bios*, “the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (1), the “particular way of life” from which [human] political life will be formed. As beings without language—not belonging to *bios*—animals such as dogs would seem to be fully beyond the borders with which sovereignty is constructed and maintained. Yet the dividing line between *bios* and *zoe* is neither easy nor clean, and there has been much debate among both theorists of biopolitics and scholars of animal ethics over just where this difference lies. Recent work on both animal intelligence and animals and ethics, has called both the *bios/zoe* division and the use of linguistic communication as a dividing line into question. As William Lynn points out, animals may lack human language, but “they are quite capable of communicative expression and comprehension” (286). As I was writing this article, the New York State Court was hearing a case in which the Nonhuman Rights Project argued that two chimpanzees held as research subjects by SUNY-Stonybrook should be granted a writ of habeas corpus, as they were being held against their consent. While not arguing that the chimpanzees are the same as humans, the lawyers for the chimpanzees argued that because of their complex cognitive functions and their “capacity to suffer pain of imprisonment,” they have a right to “personhood,” to legal protection under the law.⁴

³ For an in-depth investigation of the topic with particular relation to Heidegger, see Stuart Elden, “Heidegger’s Animals,” *Continental Philosophy Review*, 39 (2006): 271-291.

⁴ The case is still moving through the courts. For an overview of the arguments, and the case’s progression, see <http://www.onegreenplanet.org/animalsandnature/could-the-law-be-evolving-when-it-comes-to-animal-rights-chimps-personhood/> The freeing of research animals has generated controversy as well, as the animals are not always able to successfully adapt to life of freedom after their extended captivity.

Of course, different animals have vastly different characteristics and abilities, even though, as Derrida points out, in distinguishing themselves from animals, humans often group all animals together in an undifferentiated mass. Dogs in particular are animals that have, since domestication, maintained a close and complex relationship with humans. As “man’s best friend,” domestic dogs exist in conjunction with and in profound relation to humans. Donna Haraway identifies dogs as a “companion species,” but she argues that the term “is less a category than a pointer to an ongoing ‘becoming with’” (Haraway Chapter 1, section 2). For Haraway, companionship signals an intimate way of relating, one that transforms both humans and animals, such that it “make[s] a mess out of categories in the making of kin and kind” (Haraway I. 2). Dogs will forever remain a separate species, and yet our relations with them produce a peculiar kind of intimacy that rivals that of human-human relationships.

While there is certainly real value to be found in pondering the differences between humans and our animal companions, we can also learn something from what these social relationships are made to *mean*. Indeed, the meaning attached to these relationships may be almost as important as the relationships themselves. Gabriel Giorgi characterizes the differences between *bios* and *zoe* as “distinciones móviles.” As Giorgi so carefully lays out in his recent study *Formas comunes*, animals fulfill a cultural function beyond merely serving as a biopolitical dividing line:

Es un universo de cuerpos, de vivientes—con sus alianzas, sus antagonismos, y sus afectos—un campo de fuerzas e intensidades pre-individuales e impersonales el que emerge como instancia de politización....más que el dibujo persistente del humano en su diferencia respecto de los otros. El animal de la cultura, la “vida animal”, ilumina ese campo de cuerpos vivientes en su distancia o su dislocación respecto de lo humano: persona/no-persona (o *bios/zoe*) deja de superponerse a humano/animal; la “vida”—en tanto “vida que cuenta” política y culturalmente—deja de ser inmediatamente “vida humana”: los animales de la cultura arman epistemologías, órdenes formales, universos de sentido que responden a esa condición de lo político. (Giorgi, introducción)

For Giorgi, animals *are* political animals, through the way in which they are inscribed in human politico-cultural systems of meaning. Whatever their essential position, the ways in which they are treated and viewed by humans reveals a great deal about the political roles of the humans they

interact with. In this way, animal lives *say something* about—shape, give meaning to, comment on—political life.

Giorgi's assertion that the presence of animals in cultural production illuminates, explains and delimits the political is particularly useful for understanding Padura's novel, which traces the effects and afterlives of a particular kind of radicalized political life. Both Trotsky and his assassin Mercader give their lives to politics, and to the dream of a certain kind of political world. Despite their differences and the fact that they find themselves on different sides of a political divide, both of them operate according to a worldview in which there is no perceived separation between politics and ethics. That is, a decision made for political good is also seen as the "right" decision from a moral standpoint. However, their political convictions, and the personal sacrifices they make for those convictions, not only place them in physical danger but at various moments threaten the destruction of their personhood. Their behavior as political animals—their need to make decisions they view as politically and morally "right," despite the temporary costs—stands in sharp contrast to their relationships with dogs, which are notable precisely for their immediacy, their ease, and their emotionally affective nature.

It should be noted that although Padura's novel centers on these "men who love dogs," it is also about the dogs who love them back. Derrida observes that animals tend to be characterized in manichean terms; they are either seen as "absolute (because natural) goodness, absolute innocence" or as incarnating "absolute evil, cruelty, murderous savagery" (Derrida I.2). The dogs in *El hombre que amaba a los perros* are all good dogs: neither wild nor savage, they demonstrate nothing but loyalty and companionship to their accompanying humans. This pattern of goodness allows them to act as the canaries in the coalmine of ethics: that is, if Mercader, Trotsky, and Iván are at their best when relating to dogs, these relationships bring into sharp relief their failings in other areas. Dogs both show them how far away they may have strayed from their most ethical selves, and offer them a road back.

Killing a Dog

As both signs and social actors dogs play a particularly significant role in the transformation of Ramón Mercader from Catalan Republican to ardent Stalinist, and from soldier to assassin. A scene early in the novel serves to establish the relationship between animal relations and the formation of Mercader's political consciousness. It is the beginning of the Spanish Civil War. The young Ramón, loyal to the Republican side, is serving at a military outpost in the Sierra de Guadarrama when his mother Caridad, a recovering drug addict and abused spouse turned ardent communist, pays him a visit. She has come to ask him a life-changing question: Is he willing to give up his life as a simple Spanish soldier to devote himself to the greater Communist cause? Ramón's answer in the affirmative sets him on the path that will separate him from Spain and the Republican struggle, transform his identity (by giving him multiple fictitious identities and by erasing his own), and end with his murder of an aging Russian revolutionary in a modest house in Coyoacán. When Caridad arrives at the mountain outpost, she finds Ramón accompanied by a dog, Churro.⁵ Churro has become something of the outpost mascot; as Ramón explains, "Vive con nosotros en el batallón... Se me ha pegado como una lapa" (49). Ramón's affectionate attention towards the dog contrasts noticeably with the cool attitude he maintains towards his mother. Despite the fact that he ultimately accedes to her request that he join the movement, his relationship with Caridad, marred by her neglectful treatment of him in the past, has only recently been repaired. It is thus doubly surprising when Caridad: "con el arma en la mano, colocaba a *Churro* en el punto de la mira y, sin dar tiempo a que su hijo reaccionara, le disparaba en la frente" (55). The sudden violence of this moment, echoed by a bomb going off elsewhere on the mountain, is completely unexpected, as shocking for the reader as we imagine it must be for Ramón. Caridad's literal parting shot establishes her own lack of scruples (for the reader, as much as for her son); she is willing to do just about anything for the cause.

⁵ Dogs' names in Padura's text are printed in italics, as if to direct even more attention to them. In keeping with this choice of Padura's, I have chosen to keep these names in italics in my own discussion of these dogs.

It also sends Ramón a strong message: from now on, his life will involve a separation from and even the killing of what he loves.

Churro's murder can be seen as the beginning of a kind of death of Ramón himself. Taken under the wing of Kotov, a Soviet agent stationed in Barcelona, he begins working undercover for the Soviets. Kotov is pleased with his work, and sends Ramón to an undisclosed location in the Soviet Union for more specialized training, including lessons in Marxist ideology, resisting torture, weapons handling, and preparation in assuming new identities. At the end of this apprenticeship, Ramón is no longer Ramón but "Soldier 13"; he has detached himself from his previous identity to such an extent that "ya nunca volvió a ser el mismo Ramón Mercader del Río" (281). Once his training is judged complete, he is sent to Paris and given a new identity—that of Jacques Mornard, an apolitical Belgian. He is required to disappear into that identity, leaving behind his loyalties to Spain and the Republican cause and abandoning his own needs, desires, and preferences. As he takes on this series of new identities, he must sever all ties to old friends and acquaintances, even to África, a fellow Communist and the mother of his child with whom he is passionately in love.

Ramón does not entirely regret the sacrifice of his past: "Descubrió que usar otro nombre, vestir de un modo diferente al que hubiera considerado cercano a sus preferencias, e inventarse una vida anterior en la cual predominaba el desengaño por la política y el rechazo a los políticos, eran sensaciones de las que comenzaba a disfrutar recónditamente" (221). He is pleased with the skills he gains and excited by the sense of adventure. He adapts well to the rigorous demands of the Soviet training, and in the end becomes Kotov's star pupil, a distinction he enjoys. Most importantly, he is excited by the freedom to be someone else, intrigued by the ease with which he learns how to put on and take off the outline of a persona. Yet the shedding of his past and a disconnection from his identity as Ramón is later revealed to have hidden costs.

When, years later, Mercader reflects on his decision to give himself to the cause, the moment of "sí," the fateful acceptance, and all the events following it are inextricably tied to the death of the innocent animal. However, it is noteworthy that however strongly *Churro's* death may be

engraved in his memory, Ramón was merely a witness to Churro's death, not his killer. As he tells Iván many years later, "[S]oy incapaz de matar a un perro. Te lo juro" (245). This is a significant statement, given Mercader's violent murder of Trotsky, but one other scene in the novel makes López's/Mercader's declaration particularly ironic. As the final test of Ramón's loyalty to the Soviet cause, his trainers bring him face to face with a man he has never seen and order him to kill him because he is a "perro trotskista enemigo del pueblo" (284). Even though Ramón knows nothing about the man, and the man, "vestido con harapos, sacudido por el frío y el miedo" (284), is clearly in a pitiable state and not threatening to harm him, he follows through on the order. By identifying the marked man as a "Trotskyite dog," a traitor to the state, Mercader's handlers designate the man's life as of no value in the eyes of the state. In appearance, the "traitor" that Ramón kills is what in Agambian terms could be characterized as bare life, *homo sacer*, "*he who may be killed and yet not sacrificed*" (8, italics in the original). For Ramón and his handlers, the man's life is seen as having no value, other than to confirm Ramón Mercader as a loyal communist citizen/subject. With his statement that he could never kill a dog, Mercader thus distinguishes between this metaphorical "dog," who is merely bare life, and actual dogs, who are, in his mind, worth *more* than bare life. Mercader's love of dogs is a "pasión," a deep feeling "ubicada en un lugar de su conciencia ajeno a los razonamientos" (301). Even as he is trained to kill "traitors and enemies of communism" without a second thought, he continues to reserve a particular tenderness for dogs. His confession to Iván that he is unable to kill a dog indicates that he accords the dog's life a value greater than that of bare life. It also suggests that on some deep level Ramón has come to feel that all killing is wrong.

Mercader may declare himself "unable to kill a dog" because his connection with dogs reaches to a fundamental kind of emotional relation. Haraway argues that the intimacy that humans and dogs share creates a unique relationship, built on the connection established through physical contact: "Touch ramifies and shapes accountability. Accountability, caring for, being affected, entering into responsibility are not ethical abstractions;

these mundane, prosaic things are the result of having truck with one another” (Haraway, I.1). For Ramón, contact, especially physical contact, with dogs effectively takes him away from the fictional “selves” that he has constructed—Jacques Mornard, Jacson (Mornard’s American identity in Mexico), and the shades of “Ramón” that he has constructed to deal with Jacques Mornard—and brings him back to himself.

As a spy, Ramón must separate his personal feelings and desires from his actions; in other words, he must do what he can to *not* connect with people. As a human being relating to a dog, he can engage in a relationship of ethical equality. When Ramón (as Jacques) pays one of his early visits to Trotsky’s house in Coyoacán, he is jolted out of his careful, distanced posture by the appearance of Sieva, Trotsky’s grandson, and his dog Azteca. The appearance of the boy and the dog “lo turbó un poco.” Jacques/Ramón, calls the dog over, and kneels to pet him: “Por unos instantes estuvo desconectado del mundo, en un recodo del tiempo y del espacio en el que apenas estaban él, el perro y unas nostalgias que creía sepultadas” (488-89). In that moment, Jacques/Ramón is simultaneously fully present to the tactile experience of petting Azteca, responding to a relationship initiated by touch, and in the past, remembering his happiest moments and the best parts of himself. He has become a human being who ‘has truck with’ another being. He can no longer seal himself off from his feelings and his personal memories because the dog in that moment calls forth an emotional engagement and response. While Jacques/Ramón will use the scene of this encounter to build trust between him and the Trotskys, his relationship to the dog is unpremeditated.

When Ramón returns to the house in Coyoacán to set up the circumstances for the murder that will take place the following day, a kind of dress rehearsal for the actual assassination, Azteca appears again. On this occasion, however, Ramón deliberately chooses not to make contact with the dog: “Azteca se había acercado y él miró el perro como si no lo viera” (640). This time it is the dog who reaches out to Ramón, eager for the affective encounter. Yet Ramón is now wary of the dog’s effect on him; even though he sees Azteca, he chooses not to engage. The subtle turning away from an interaction he would normally have welcomed signals the

extent to which Ramón has disassociated himself from his deepest emotions and his ethical compass. Killing Trotsky requires that he sublimate any of his own ethical or moral feelings.

Liev Davidovich—Leon Trotsky—the man in Ramón's sights, has also made great sacrifices for his political ambitions and ideals. Betrayed by Stalin and expelled from the Communist Party in Russia, he is forced into exile, first in Turkey, then in Norway, and finally, as a last resort, in Mexico. At each step, Trotsky continues organizing and writing, working to establish an international communist movement in opposition to Stalinism. As Odette Casamayor-Cisneros notes, Padura portrays Trotsky as "el último creyente puro del comunismo" (125). He refuses to give up his intellectual and political work, despite the negative effects of this intense work ethic on his failing health, the danger to his family that his publications present, and an increasingly hostile political situation, both back in Russia (where Stalinist purges are well underway) and in the various locations of his exile. Padura portrays Trotsky as a man of intense political passions and deep obsessions. Despite the personal cost of this political work, exile in no way dampens his desire to fight; it fuels his anger at Stalin's betrayals. In the conflict between the personal and the political, Trotsky is fully willing to make personal sacrifices but absolutely unwilling to change or betray his political convictions.

As with Mercader, for Trotsky, a relationship with dogs inspires in him a spontaneous, unforced emotional response. When we meet Trotsky, on the first stage of his exile from Russia, he is accompanied by his faithful borzoi Maya. He feeds her by hand; she follows him everywhere. The presence of Maya in the first stages of his exile calms him: "Silbó, reclamando la presencia de Maya, y se sintió aliviado cuando la perra se acercó" (37). The dog not only brings Liev Davidovich out of the maze of his thoughts, but also connects him to some sense of belonging. Her loyalty and constant presence stand in contrast to the shifting loyalties and betrayals going on around him. When Maya finally dies in Turkey, in the first stage of the family's exile, it is as if Trotsky begins a newer and more profound kind of exile, one that does not end until Coyoacán, when his grandson Sieva acquires Azteca. The dog's name, an indication of the

profound connection that the Trotskys will develop with Mexico, also hints at Trotsky's own fate, at the betrayals that will bring about his death at Mercader's hands.

Trotsky's devotion to Maya, and his love for dogs in general, is laid out in a discussion that the Russian has with André Breton, who is in Mexico on a cultural commission from the French government and with whom Trotsky is collaborating on a manifesto calling for the creation of an international communist federation. When Trotsky admits his love for animals to Breton, the Surrealist tells Trotsky that the Soviet exile is merely attributing his own affection to the dog. This assertion sets off an intense debate:

Con argumentos quizás más pasionales que racionales, Liev Davidovich trató de convencer al francés: ¿se podía negar que un perro sintiera amor por su amo?, ¿cuántas historias de ese amor y ese amistad no habían escuchado? Si Breton hubiera conocido a Maya y visto su relación con él, tal vez su opinión hubiera sido otra. El poeta le dijo que lo entendía y le aclaró que él también amaba a los perros, pero el sentimiento partía de él, el humano. El perro, si acaso, expresaba de manera primaria que sabía distinguir los efectos de su relación con los hombres: miedo al humano que puede provocarle dolor, por ejemplo. (469)

Through the discussion between the Breton and Trotsky, Padura lays out the main arguments in the long-running (and ongoing) philosophical and scientific debate over the ability of animals to experience human-like emotions.⁶ Trotsky, in other matters firmly rationalist, recalls his relationship with Maya as one of genuine emotional connection and true affection on both sides. While quite willing to see human beings as motivated by pragmatic matters, he patently refuses to see the dog as acting out of anything other than its own genuine emotional engagement. In Trotsky's mind, the dog's motivation remains pure; he thus views his own response as pure because this is the ethical relationship the dog creates and demands.

One of the challenges of Mercader's assignment to assassinate Trotsky is that he is required to become more than a simple hit man; because Trotsky has already thwarted numerous attempts on his life, his

⁶ Derrida traces the origins of this question to Jeremy Bentham, who asks if animals are capable of experiencing suffering.

compound in Coyoacán is well-guarded and secured. To get close enough to kill him, Ramón must actually become known to Trotsky—he must forge a kind of relationship with him. In one of Ramón's first meetings with the Russian exile, he finds Trotsky in his study with Azteca, and the conversation turns to dogs. Trotsky, recounting his time with Maya and extolling the virtues of the borzois declares, "Yo siempre he amado a los perros. Tienen una bondad y una capacidad de ser fieles que superan a las de muchos humanos" (610). Ramón/Jacques agrees, and admits that he too loves dogs, "como si se avergonzara" (610). In what may be the most genuine moment in their relationship, the two men are united by dogs, by the recognition of their mutual participation in canine-human affective relationships. This moment creates an opening for the men themselves to establish an authentic connection, and reveals some of the fundamental similarities between the two enemies. Ramón/Jacques does not allow himself to participate fully in what could be the moment of deepest understanding; to admit to sharing this characteristic with Trotsky might be to establish a connection with him, something he must avoid at all costs. Instead, he uses this shared affection strategically, taking advantage of Trotsky's momentary goodwill to ask the exiled leader if he can interview him. In effect, what could have been an opening into a more intimate relating with the Russian becomes the material that allows Mercader to set the stage for his assassination of Trotsky.

If Mercader and Trotsky are most fully present to themselves when interacting with dogs, then the circumstances—both national and personal—and decisions—both large and small—that place them on opposite sides of a violent crime can be seen as alienating. Since many of these decisions are made in the name of political loyalty or political conviction, it would seem to be politics that takes them away from their better selves. While this is true for both Trotsky and Mercader, nowhere is this contrast better illustrated in the novel than in the figure of Kotov, Ramón's Soviet trainer and handler. Kotov is the ultimate political player; while declaring himself a man of firm convictions, dedicated to the cause, he understands how politics under Stalin works perhaps better than any character we come to know well, and is fully able to shift loyalties and

identities at a moment's notice. Indeed, he has so digested the principles of communism that they have come to serve as a justification for his lack of attachment to life: "El individuo no es una unidad irrepetible, sino un concepto que se suma y forma la masa, que sí es real," he says to Ramón at one point (374). If the state of the masses is what matters, why should individual identities be important? When Ramón pushes to know more of Kotov's life, his actual name, Kotov responds, "¿Qué es un nombre, Jacques?...Esos perros que a ti te gustan tanto tienen nombre, ¿y qué? Siguen siendo perros" (374). As we have seen elsewhere, a dog for Ramón is not *just* a dog. Yet for Kotov, both individual identity and the affective relationships formed by individual identities are irrelevant—and disposable—in the face of something greater. Individual ethical breaches are justified if they are in the service of the greater utopian ideal. The attempt to reach that something greater, however, will enact terrible costs. In this particular story, the costs include not only Trotsky's life but also Ramón's personhood. In giving everything to the cause, Ramón almost leaves himself behind.

Ramón Mercader's brief conversation with Leon Trotsky appears to have a lasting effect, even if it fails to stop him from murdering the Russian. If brief encounters with dogs have offered Mercader a momentary return to himself, towards the end of his life, dogs—and borzois in particular—will offer him a path towards a kind of closure. His murder of Trotsky is his greatest achievement as a Stalinist spy, the realization of the job for which he was trained to do. At the same time, it is the moment when his political conviction places him farthest away from his ethical center. Once the murder is completed—once he is, in effect, no longer Jacson, no longer Jacques, no longer any of the shells he has spent so long building—he still needs to find his way back to Ramón. He does this by returning to the simple, visceral elements of living, such as cooking, and finally by becoming López, the elderly man who takes daily walks with his borzois on a Cuban beach. It is as "the man who loves dogs" then that he becomes someone, an individual, able to tell his story to someone willing to hear it. It is through the dogs that he will meet Iván, his Cuban interlocutor, who will allow López to tell the story that he has been unable to share with anyone for so

long. The borzois, which Trotsky called “the noblest of dogs,” in effect facilitate something close to a genuine friendship.

Borzois on the Beach

When he meets the aging Mercader on the beach in 1977, Iván is drawn to him because of the presence of his two borzois, so elegant and simultaneously so out of place in Cuba, just as Mercader's story is both out of place and unknown in the Cuban context. Iván's decision to reach out to the older Spanish gentleman is equally surprising. If Trotsky and Mercader share a willingness to take great personal risks in the name of political ideals, Iván offers a counterexample. As he explains to his friend Dany shortly before his death, his whole life has been governed by fear: “Me he pasado toda mi cabrona vida con la sensación de estar huyendo de algo y ya estoy cansado de correr...” (754). Iván graduates from university with a degree in journalism, a well-received first book of short stories, and dreams of becoming a great writer. He gives up those dreams when he is sent to Baracoa, in eastern Cuba, as punishment for writing a short story that is deemed inappropriate and, implicitly, counterrevolutionary. Upon his return to Havana, he finds a job working for a journal of veterinary medicine, (which explains his knowledge of and interest in the Russian dogs), and never again takes up writing as a creative activity. He lives life on a small scale: a modest house in the working-class Lawton neighborhood, a modest job, regular meetings with a small group of friends. One could argue that his life is just as governed by politics as Trotsky's or Mercader's, but for the opposite reason: Iván seems to live his life so as to remain as apolitical, as far from politics as possible. His gradual friendship with Mercader and Mercader's story offer him an unusual second chance to return to his dreams of producing writing of significance. Yet even though he is aware of the significance of this particular narrative, his fear of a political misstep keeps him from writing Mercader's story for several decades. He dies with the manuscript still unpublished, having only shared the story with his wife Ana and his close friend Dany.

If Iván's life can be seen as a retreat from politics, and from having to choose again between his own creative expression and political demands,

his encounters with dogs push him in an opposite direction from that in which politics has sent him. His interactions with dogs—or, more specifically, with people with dog—force him to take risks for others, to make sacrifices for others in ways that he will not for himself. Iván meets Ana, with whom he will share a passionate and caring last relationship, when she brings her sick poodle Tato into the veterinary dispensary. With the veterinarian already gone for the day, it is Iván who steps up to perform amateur surgery on the dog. As he recognizes later, something inside of him may have wanted him to take a risk, to take on the challenge of performing the surgery: “Todavía me pregunto cómo es posible que me atreviera, o si en realidad yo estaba deseando atreverme” (24). Without the desperate pleas of a woman with a sick dog to motivate him, it is doubtful whether Iván himself would have dared to take that next step. The confidence gained from this successful surgery launches his career as an amateur veterinarian, something that helps him survive the most difficult moments of the Special Period.⁷

Just as Ana’s dog Tato facilitates their meeting, Ivan’s and Ana’s relationship is marked by their relationships with dogs. According to Iván, Ana is an “amante apasionada de los perros” (25), and this passion, as well as their love for each other, unites the couple. After a stable emotionally unsatisfying first marriage, Iván’s relationship with Ana offers him the freedom, both personal and emotional, that he has needed. It is only at Ana’s request that Iván finally finds the courage to begin writing Mercader’s story. Finally, dogs also seem to help Iván articulate what he himself cannot do or express. When Ana becomes ill, Truco, their second dog, provides her with companionship and solace. Truco’s name (Trick, in English) seems to hint at an identity role of shifting significance. After Ana dies, the dog becomes a kind of canine double for Iván, a performative mirror of Iván’s own sadness and depression. When Iván’s friend Dany stops by to check on him, he discovers that Truco has been refusing to eat.

⁷ The Cuban Special Period, known in Spanish as *el Período especial en tiempo de paz*, was the term given by Fidel Castro to the economic crisis into which Cuba entered in the early 1990s as the result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Cuba’s loss of the USSR’s economic support. Characterized by material scarcity of all kinds, it produced an accompanying social shift, as the achievements of the revolution were both put to the test and re-evaluated.

Iván diagnoses Truco's problem as "melancolía,...una enfermedad que se cura sola o lo puede matar" (749). Yet Dany also observes of Iván, "En sus ojos había una tristeza húmeda idéntica a la que flotaba en la mirada de su perro" (749). While Iván does not intentionally take his own life, Iván's observations on this shared melancholy prefigure his own death not long after this exchange, a fatal accident that also takes the life of the dog. Truco will be Iván's companion in death, as in life.

Who Lets the Dogs Out?

By having the now-older Iván serve as both scribe and witness to the story of Ramón Mercader's assassination of Leon Trotsky, *El hombre que amaba a los perros* ties this earlier moment of political breakdown to post-Soviet Cuba. Yet what appears to be a triangulated story of three men is revealed in the end to be the story of four. Although Iván will go on to set down Mercader's story in writing, he will not be the last one to take responsibility for it. That responsibility, as well as the role of meta-narrator, falls to Iván's friend Dany, who discovers Iván's body, along with that of his dog Truco, crushed under the roof of Iván's house. Of the four men, Dany is the only one who admits that he is not "especialmente fond de perros" (749). Even though—or perhaps *because*—he has become the "successful writer" that Iván longed to be, Dany is more of a skeptic than Iván. While Iván comes to see the humanity in Mercader, Dany cannot empathize with Trotsky's assassin. He reserves his compassion for Iván, seeing his friend as a representative for "the [Cuban] masses,": "su personaje funciona también como metáfora de una generación y como prosaico resultado de una derrota histórica" (760). For him the real story is not "Trotsky's fanaticism" or Ramón Mercader's violent act of devotion to the cause, but that of Iván, whose frustrated dreams and tragic end provide a metonymic example of the costs of the initial apparent triumph and ultimate loss of socialism.

Casamayor-Cisneros argues that Padura, along other writers of his generation, is concerned with the unmasking of society and the stripping away of its façades, lies, and fantasy narratives: "[P]recisan de la certeza—o al menos la intuición—de que en algún momento la máscara y lo

inconsistente han de parar, cediendo paso a lo auténtico, lo sólido y duradero” (117). If we take the telling of Ramón Mercader’s story as a one kind of unmasking, what is revealed is a story of political engagement and commitment to a communist ideal that has been lost in a narrative favoring a Stalinist perspective. Seen another way, however, the results are far from positive: Trotsky’s death and Mercader’s violent actions are revealed to be sacrifices for a utopian dream that is never realized. However, neither is Iván’s choice of silence necessarily a sacrifice that aids him in the long run, as the dissolution of the USSR brings an end to the Cuban revolution’s political dream and thrusts Cuban society into a new era of crisis and change. In spite of—or perhaps because of—their non-human aspects, the dogs in Padura’s novel highlight the humanity of his protagonists, and the terrible costs that must be paid when that humanity is lost or put aside. If Padura’s narrative offers us anything “real,” anything lasting, it is in affirming the importance of relation itself. Yet by portraying politics as a distraction from the ethical encounters that truly matter, Padura’s novel itself neatly sidesteps the questions of the “friendship plot.” Is it possible to be truly ethical *and* politically committed? And what would that new politics look like? Like the cynical Dany, Padura’s novel mourns the ethical failures and broken dreams of the past, but is silent when looking towards the future.

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